

THE
MIRACLE
MARRIAGE

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REITA LAMBERT

THE MIRACLE MARRIAGE

The Miracle Marriage

A Love Story

By
REITA LAMBERT



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The Miracle Marriage

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THE MIRACLE MARRIAGE

CHAPTER I

THE LAST STRAW

RICHARD SELLS let himself into the dimly lighted hall of his Madison Avenue house, closed the heavy doors behind him, and stood for a moment in a listening attitude. Silence greeted him—silence hemmed in by the muffled rumble of the city and a blur of voices from the servants' quarters downstairs.

As he started up the broad staircase, the deep, musical voice of the library clock spoke. Midnight!

He found the amber wall lights in his sitting room glowing softly on the richly tooled volumes that lined the walls, and on the sedate old walnut furniture. With a repressed, methodical precision, he slipped into a dressing gown, lit a cigarette, and tapped lightly on his wife's door before opening it.

Here also a light was burning, striving to penetrate a china damsel's voluminous silk-and-lace petticoat, beneath which it was imprisoned. His glance swept the room, while a slow, sardonic smile twitched at his lips.

How easy it was to appraise and label Della, simply by entering her room! Originally one of those austere chambers of an equally austere era, only the severe white-marble mantel now remained from that

discreet day. Precise and immaculate, with its prim, pursed grate, it appeared to gaze out in horrified wonder upon the tufted and lurid accouterment of the room.

The dressing table, laden with all the subtle and mysterious accessories of a fashionable woman's toilet; the rococo Louis Quinze bedstead and chairs; the inlaid cigarette box; the impalpable gown and negligee draped across the bed, and the small, rose-silk mules beneath; the faint odor of exotic scent that seemed to exude from all the gaudy trifles strewn so carelessly about the room—all this was Della.

As he looked, Richard was assailed by a guilty unease, the unease of a man who gazes upon a sleeping friend—sleeping, and unaware that one is being observed. For Della's gods played her false. Her tale was here, writ large and clear for prying eyes—the tale of petty vanities, feverish gayeties, and empty days crowded full, but still ringing hollowly.

He sighed and eased himself into a chair. He was a tall man, with long feet and hands, and a lean, ascetic face prematurely rutted by weariness and frustration. He settled himself with the composure that was habitual to him—not so much composure, perhaps, as tenacious repression.

It was after two o'clock before his wife came, preceded by the cough of a fretful motor under the window and by the shrill of high, gay voices that echoed up and down the street. Then he heard the reverberation of the front door, and light, quick footsteps along the hall.

"Well, for the love of Pete! I was all tuned up for a scream."

She paused in the doorway as he rose to his feet,

with a small, bejeweled hand placed dramatically over her heart.

"I didn't intend to frighten you, my dear."

"Well, you know what some one once said about good intentions, Dicky!"

She was shrugging off her wrap as she came in. Now she flung it on the nearest chair, scuffed off her pumps, and strolled across to the cigarettes.

"Lord, I'm *dead*!" she said, and lit the cigarette nervously. "And that pathetic stuff the Osburnes serve in lieu of booze!"

She flung herself on the chaise longue with a deep sigh that brought a heavy cloud of smoke with it. She was slender, sinuous, glittering.

"Well, you haven't honored me thusly just to give me the once-over, Dicky, have you? Of course I'm delighted, but——"

"No," he said slowly, and fumbled in the pocket of his dressing gown. "No, Della—I wanted to speak with you—alone. This appears to be the only time I can achieve that privilege."

She yawned elaborately.

"Won't it keep?"

"No."

"Br-r!"

She affected a shiver. Her husband's eyes rested speculatively upon her as he drew a crumpled newspaper clipping from his pocket.

"I cut this out of the *Times* this morning," said Richard quietly, "after my attention had been drawn to it at the club."

She took the clipping, glanced at it, and handed it back to him with a sharp giggle.

"Well, what of it? I took my lecture and paid my fine. This darned country is so cluttered up with

traffic rules and regulations, it's a wonder to me that half the people who drive cars aren't in jail! I've got most of the cops fixed, but this one was new. Anyway, I was only going about forty."

"That's the least of it, Della. You were arrested for speeding——"

"I tell you I wasn't going more than forty, and these damned officious cops——"

"—at two o'clock yesterday morning," continued her husband, "in the company of one of the most worthless and vicious men in New York."

"Oh, Hal's not so vicious when you know how to pet him!"

"His reputation is vicious."

"Oh, Lord, I get you, Dicky!"

"And it is printed here"—he tapped the clipping with a long forefinger—"for all the world to see—your name and his! Mrs. Richard Sells—Hal Dubose—two o'clock in the morning!"

"Well, what of it?" Her voice was mutinous now.

"Can you ask?"

"I can, but that's only half of it, deary. Will you answer?"

"That is precisely why I am here. It isn't the first time you've broken into print along with some bounder."

"Well, I've got to have some one to play with, haven't I? Heaven knows you're a total loss in that respect."

"Then I must insist that you choose your playmates with a little more consideration for me—for my name."

She giggled delightedly.

"Light is breaking!" she cried. "Dicky's pride is

hurt. He doesn't care what I do, so long as I don't break into print doing it! Oh, my dear, you are a fraud!"

He took a step toward her. For an instant fear wiped the insolent smile from her lips and arched the clipped brows over her cynical, blue eyes. For an instant he towered over her, the flapping folds of his dressing gown accentuating his height, his lips drawn tightly over his clenched teeth.

"You're going a little too far, Della. Do you think it fair to abuse your position in this way? I've given you your head——"

"But you're keeping tight hold on the reins, I notice."

"You bear my name."

"Ah, that's it!" She blew a smoke ring expertly. Now we're coming to the point! I'm a modest creature, you see, else I might think you jealous."

He smiled bitterly.

"I wish to Heaven I were!"

"How silly, Dicky! To be jealous one must be maudlinly in love. To be in love is aging. It isn't worth the tears and wrinkles. Go along to bed, man, and I'll give your remarks due consideration."

He went back to the tufted, pink chair and sank into it.

"I'm not going to bed, my dear, until I know what you're going to do."

"Do? Good gracious, how energetic you sound! I'm going to bed, of course, if you ever give me the chance."

"I don't mean *now*, Della, as you very well know. What are we going to do—about all this? We can't go on."

"The pronoun's plural. Speak for yourself, my good husband. What do you mean, we can't go on?"

Her levity, as always, seemed to make her impregnable, but he still held to his purpose.

"I, for one, can't go on like this," he said quietly. "Can you face it—endlessly? Is this your conception of marriage?"

"Why not?"

"Are you happy, Della?"

"S'pose so. I hadn't considered it."

He leaned toward her earnestly.

"You're not conscious of any lack? Are you, *can* you be, satisfied?"

"Well, what did you expect of marriage, dear man?"

"An occasional taste of happiness—a real home—a wife—children."

"Bourgeois ambitions, my dear, I must say! Besides, they went out with leg-of-mutton sleeves."

"Do you believe that, Della?"

"I know it! You're archaic, Dicky. What's that one about trying to reach a star? Don't you know by this time that it can't be done?" She gave him a hard, lazy smile. "Trouble with you, Dicky, you're trying to get more out of life than there is in it."

Her husband slumped back in his chair, while the smart truism edged its way into his consciousness.

"You're making a heap of misery for yourself, Dick," she said easily. "You don't expect me to sit by the fire and mend your socks while you read 'Little Dorrit' to me, do you?"

"No," he said quietly. "No, I don't expect that of you, Della—not any more—no more than you expect me to mingle with your—your——"

"My kennel of jazz hounds, eh?" supplied Della. "No, you're right. I leave you to moon and aspire

by your lonesome. All I ask in return is that you should grant me the same latitude."

"And that is your idea of a happy marriage?" He held her gaze with narrowed, bitter eyes. "I should call the arrangement a vulgar farce."

"Aren't the two words synonymous, Dicky?" At his gesture of revulsion her lips curled. "Look here, did you come in here to-night to point the way to the nearest exit?"

"Do you see any good reasons for keeping on like this?"

"Oh, then you did!" she sneered. "This way out, eh? You *are* a chivalrous soul! But it isn't so simple as all that, Dicky. I know a thousand reasons for keeping on like this, as you put it." Her voice rose. "You are getting on my nerves, always clogging the works with your silly sob stuff just when they're running smoothly. Why can't you be a decent sport and take your medicine? Half the men in our set——"

"*Your* set!"

"Well, my set, then, would give their contraband liquor to be in your shoes, and to have a wife who never asks questions or complaints! You know I don't butt in on your affairs, or pull any Billy Sunday stuff on you. If ours isn't an ideal marriage, I'd like to see one!" She leaned back and reached for another cigarette. "It suits me well enough."

"You prefer this to your freedom?"

"Wouldn't know what to do with my freedom, as you call it, if I got it. Besides"—she grinned maliciously—"I'd lose the prestige that accrues to a married lady. If you had sense enough to count your blessings, you'd settle down and enjoy yourself. You

want marriage to be as it is in the movies—all love and kisses and baby clothes. Don't you see, that's why it is like that in the movies, because it's so novel?"

"You think so?"

"I know so! That kind of a marriage was dry rot. Why don't you jazz yourself up a bit? You're out of step, old chap!"

Richard moved toward the door, and a chilly desolation went with him. He knew quite well that her assumption of indifference was the result of cool calculation. Behind that metallic cloak of cynicism she took refuge from his protests.

He paused at the door, and turned back to her.

"About this Dubose bounder—will you be careful to see that his name is not linked publicly with yours again?"

"I'll do my darnedest, old thing. Nighty night!"

"I think I shall be leaving town in a day or so, Della."

"Leaving town? Where are you bound?"

"I'm not certain where I shall go."

"But it's nearly time to open the house at East Hampton. What shall I do about that?"

"Anything you please."

She sprang up and came toward him with repressed eagerness, her stockinged feet padding softly over the rugs, the gleaming silver of her gown trailing after her, her cigarette hanging from her limp, white fingers.

"Then I won't bother about it, if you're not going to come down. The place bores me insufferably, anyhow." Her eyes were very bright. "Fay Denny and some of her bunch are sailing for France in a week or so, Dicky. Suppose I join the parade?"

He nodded absently.

"Very well," he said. "I'll see that your account is kept in order."

"Oh, goody!" she rejoiced. "I've been dying of inanition lately. This darned town is as dull as a bad musical comedy. You're a duck!"

Once in his room, back in the reassuring presence of his books and worn, substantial chairs, he stood aware, as always, that her blasé sophistries had left their noxious trail across his spirits.

Doubts assailed him, crowding in darkly upon his bleak lethargy; and at last they stung into sudden revolt the emaciated shadow of the idealism buried for a decade beneath the débris of his spiritual and marital wreckage.

CHAPTER II

FREEDOM

THE village of Standish, named long ago in honor of the sturdy Miles, lies beneath its venerable elms, a short mile in from the Sound, in the reminiscent attitude of one whose memories are no puerile affairs. The position of the ancient houses, grouped about the village common like children squatting in a ring, adds to this appearance of brooding placidity. Scarcely one of these houses—spacious, many windowed, invariably white—but has contributed its paragraph to American history.

The common itself, crisscrossed by four pebbled paths, had known the rumble of drums and the restless scuffle of horses' feet when the loyal citizens of Standish had responded to the call of their country. A weather-stained young private, in Civil War regalia, stands sturdily at the intersection of the four paths to commemorate one of these occasions. A sparsely lettered board, standing whitely beneath the trees, and richly embellished with gold stars, attests to the town's most recent sacrifice.

Richard Sells, making his way up from the little railroad station, responded to the valiant significance of these memorials with a thrill of appreciation; but if the town had enriched the nation's military archives, it wore its honors with modest stoicism. The slothful spell of a June morning overlay the streets and the common.

Well off the State road, almost no motorists invaded the isolated little town, and the atmosphere was blessedly free of the stench and fret of cars. As he strolled beneath the drooping elms, something of the pervasive tranquillity communicated itself to Richard Sells.

Richard strolled into the corner drug store, invested in a pack of cigarettes, and favored the vendor with one of his weary smiles.

"The beach can't be far from here, if my map means what it seems to say," he remarked.

"It's straight down the road," vouchsafed the druggist pleasantly. "This way—I'll show you."

He ambled, a plump, pink, unhurried individual, to the screen door, and, leaning comfortably against the plate-glass window, waved a blunt finger.

"Straight down, and then take the first road to the right. This one would take you plumb to the sluice, and you'd have to come back. The road leadin' to the right'll take you to the beach."

Richard thanked him, and moved off down the road. Judging by the map from which he had selected Standish because of its evident inaccessibility, the village had appeared to overhang the Sound. Apparently his deductions had been a trifle optimistic, though the druggist's directions implied that the water could not be very far away.

But presently he came to the turn where the road led down to the beach. He could see the water, suave and green, with a few sporadic sails sown on its placid surface.

Now the country took on the flavor and the color of the sea. Fields of waving beach grass flanked the red road. The scattered houses were humble and weather-beaten, with trails of crushed oyster shells

that served in lieu of paths. A crude sign before one of the houses announced that lobsters were for sale, and a trio of barefooted children romped around an upturned canoe in a yard where an old man sat roping a sail.

Unconsciously, Richard quickened his pace, his spirit lifting to meet the salt-laden breeze that swept up from the water. If Standish knew that a dash of rose water in the coffee was a smart gesture, or that the Frisco had succeeded the fox trot, its serenity was unimpaired by the knowledge. Richard grinned at the whimsy, and the grin gave birth to an amused chuckle that brought him to an abrupt pause.

He had left the humble cottages behind now, and stood before the last house on the road—a rambling white affair of Colonial vintage, with a wide lawn that sloped down to meet the reaches of beach grass beyond. It was a stolid, substantial house, with a square tower protruding stoutly from the roof and girdled by an iron balcony; but it was not the house, nor the anomaly of the lookout, that held Richard's gaze.

What most attracted his attention was a plump white launch, at rest upon a couple of sturdy rollers, in the very middle of that precise lawn. There was something ludicrous in the picture—the stout little sea craft anchored in the midst of all this sedate circumspection, more than a hundred yards from the beach, snugly secure from the vagaries of the tides.

Richard moved impulsively across the grass, and read the cut brass letters athwart the stern of the launch, proclaiming that she was the *Dorcas*. The odor of fresh paint and turpentine clung to her, and her small deck showed clean stripes where a few

boards had been wedged in beside the old. Hands in his pockets, Richard studied her with delighted curiosity, until a drawling voice rode into his reverie:

"Well, she ain't graceful, but she's pretty snug, eh?"

"Yes, I should say so—very," responded Richard promptly.

He found himself looking into a pair of small, twinkling, blue eyes—so small, so deeply set in the leathery network about them, that they seemed to have been squeezed into their grooves by dint of the most persevering effort. Above the eyes were heavy tufts of ragged, beetling brows, in perfect affinity with the straggling mustache that bristled on the upper lip, and the visor of an ancient khaki cap sat jauntily over one ear.

Richard's swift appraisal guessed the stranger's age to be sixty. He was a massive figure of a man, weathered to a copper shade, with his face seamed and rutted by the years, like the bark of an aged oak.

"She looks like a stout little bark," commented Richard critically. "I was wondering what she was doing up here, out of water."

"Jest a-restin' her old bones. She needed it," said the old man, rocking gently from heel to toe as he spoke. "You should 'a' seen her when I brought her in!"

"Salvaged her, did you?"

"Salvaged her—yes, sir, with her starboard side staved in and her keel crushed. Oh, she was a sight, she was! I been workin' on her fer a couple o' years, off and on."

"Going to launch her one of these days?"

The old man chuckled. The sound was like the suppressed roar of an amiable lion.

"I tell Dorcas—that's my daughter—I'm waitin' fer the tide." His shoulders shook at this pleasantry, and then his grin was succeeded by a portentous solemnity. "No lie, it really did once—back in '79, that was. The water rose clean up here and flooded the cellar. I was a kid then. I recollect well paddlin' a dory around these very lawns."

"You don't say!" said Richard, with a polite show of wonder. "Tide rose that high, did it?"

"Yes, sir! I tell Dorcas what's happened once can happen ag'in, and one of these days we'll wake up to find the old girl afloat!" His voice rumbled off again on the wave of his mighty chuckle, which he cut short with a question. "Stranger in these parts, be ye?"

"Yes," replied Richard. "I'm just wandering around."

"Aim to stop a while?"

"Yes, if I can find some one willing to take me in."

"There's a hotel uptown—sets a good table, they say. I ain't one to eat away from home myself, but they say the hotel sets a good table."

"But I'd rather not stay at a hotel," confided Richard, with a wistful glance toward the white house. "You see, I wanted to stay down here nearer to the water. I thought I might prevail upon some family to take me in. I'm not particular, and I should be glad to pay their own price."

The old man's cordial loquacity was suddenly enveloped in a noncommittal silence. His weather-beaten face became a guileless mask of innocence.

"The hotel sets a good table," he repeated defensively.

"You don't happen to know of any one around here, do you, who would take a boarder for the summer?"

"No-o," said the old man thoughtfully. "Don't know's I do—no place *you'd* like to stay at, least-wise."

Richard took an uncertain step toward the road, but the drawling voice stopped him.

"Aim to stay the summer, do ye?"

"Yes," said Richard promptly, and with a faint hope in his eyes, though the question seemed to have been thrown out idly enough.

The old man merely pursed his lips and shrugged his stooped, lean shoulders, as if to indorse the idea as an excellent one.

"Fishing good around here?" asked Richard, as they strolled across the lawn side by side.

"Tolerable. Blackfish, and plenty of flounders—snapper blues, too, come August. You from the city?"

"New York."

"Well, now, I been there many a time. Never got far beyond the water front, though."

"You were a sailor?"

"I been everything, from cabin boy to skipper. Fer twenty-eight years I was never in port fer more'n a month to one time."

"And now you've settled down on land," observed Richard, with a glance toward the thriving garden in the rear of the house.

"Jest like that lazy hulk back there." The old man jerked his head toward the plump launch. "I'm

under petticoat orders, now. Dorcas—that's my daughter—she's skipper here."

Richard smiled. The noonday sun was pouring down upon his head, and the road and the fields of beach grass were in the lethargic torpor of breathless heat. He was conscious of a sharp reaction from his first buoyant enthusiasm—conscious that he was hungry, and that his lunch was still a problematical possibility.

"Well, if you ever do launch the *Dorcas*, I'll engage passage if I'm around," he said genially. Then, with one of his rare, confident smiles: "I don't suppose you'd consider taking me in, would you? I can't imagine a more delightful spot than this. I can give you plenty of references, and I would be as little trouble as possible."

For a long moment the old man made no reply. With his hands buried deep in his khaki pockets, he received the suggestion with solemn deliberation. Richard's smile held something of the frustration and loneliness that lay behind him—something of boyish entreaty, which lifted the dislike of the well-groomed New Yorker that a place like Standish instinctively feels.

"I'm afeared that ain't possible, stranger," he temporized gruffly. "We don't take boarders here."

"I know that, but I thought you might make an exception in my case. You see, there's something about this old house, and about you——" The smile spoke for him again. "Well, something drew me straight down here. I felt, when I first saw the place, as if I had come home."

The old man's deliberate stare refused to hold any longer. His eyes shifted, and his voice carried the husky portent of one who reveals a great secret.

"I'll tell you what, stranger. You can ask Dorcas—that's my daughter. She's skipper here, like I told you. I'm only mate, and"—he finished with a whisper—"she's a tartar, that girl. Come along! No harm askin', is there?"

He was leading the way up the gravel path that wound around the broad foundation of the old house to a small back porch canopied by a rich trellis of morning glories. Here he paused, while he fixed a solemn glance upon Richard—a glance blended of trepidation and fearful auguries. Then he lifted his voice.

"Dorcas! Be ye there, girl?"

He turned to Richard.

"Course we ain't never done it before. Not that I wouldn't be willin', but the girl, she's——"

"Yes, father! Do you want me?"

By this time Richard had been sufficiently overwhelmed by the old man's timid intercession on his account to experience a genuine sense of guilt at the sound of the girl's voice. Now he glanced up at the figure in the doorway, while astonishment succeeded his fear and swift appreciation tumbled after.

The screen door had swung outward to disclose a young girl in the aperture. Such a girl, with carefully calculated effect, might grace the star rôle in some rural drama on Broadway, but she was the first of her type that Richard had ever seen in the flesh. She was slender, with the slenderness of immaturity, but she held herself with the erect poise of abundant health and vitality—shoulders squared, small feet planted firmly.

"Now, Dorcas!" began the old man. "Now, girl,

here's a young man that wants—now lemme get through, and don't go flyin' into a rage——”

“Father!” Her puzzled frown flew from her father to Richard, who was awkwardly twisting the hat he had snatched off at her appearance. The old man's face was working convulsively, and from his throat came a mighty rumble. “Father! Now *what* are you laughing at? Father!”

He conquered his mirth with tremendous effort, and drew the back of his hand across his wet eyes.

“Why, at *him*, Dorcas!” He jerked his head toward the astounded Richard. “Did you see his face, girl? Did you see his face when you come out—how scared it was, and then——” He went off into another shaking fit. “I told him you were a regular tartar. He was plumb scared. Oh, Lordy!”

Crimson rode slowly up beneath the film of tan that coated the girl's cheeks, and she caught her nether lip between her teeth.

“Father, how *can* you? And before a stranger, too!”

“It's all right, Dorie. There, now, I'm sorry. I've said it, ain't I? I jest couldn't resist it, but I'm sorry.”

His humility was abject. The girl's lips lifted in an indulgent smile as she turned to Richard.

“He's incorrigible,” she said. “You must forgive him—we all have to. Father's jokes!”

She spread her fingers in helpless pantomime, as if the subject were far beyond words. Richard was quick to follow up his advantage.

“I had been pleading with your father to take me in as a sort of boarder. He said that yours was the deciding vote, but that he was willing.”

“Now, father, aren't you ashamed of yourself?”

she said, and turned to Richard. "Of course that's for father to decide, and it looks as if he had decided already—though we don't take boarders, you know."

"No, Dorcas, girl, you know how you be——"

"Daddy, behave!"

The old man drooped lugubriously under the admonition, but his eyes were merry as they sought Richard's.

"Didn't I tell you she was skipper, friend? You see fer yourself how it is."

But Richard was smiling up at the girl.

"We've never done anything like that before," she was telling him; "though I've often thought it would be company for father if he had another man around."

"I should try to be as little trouble as possible," Richard assured her.

"You'll have to watch your p's and q's!" prophesied the old man, with a chuckle.

"Now, father!" chided his daughter, and to Richard she said pleasantly: "Will you come in? I'm just ready to put dinner on the table."

They filed into the kitchen—a great square room with braided rugs on the floor, a range set in a wide old chimney of red brick, and muslin sash curtains at the windows. The same air of tranquillity that he had felt in the village pervaded the big room.

"I left my bags up at the station," he announced.

"Shall we give him the south room, Dorcas girl?"

"The east room will be cooler, dad."

"But I thought mebbe he'd like the view from the south windows."

Richard broke in half timidly.

"I've been wondering, since I'm lucky enough to

be here, whether the room in the tower is in use," he suggested. "I noticed it from the road. There must be a view from those windows."

"Lordy, boy! that room's like to be as hot as Tophet, come real warm weather!"

"In that case I could carry a blanket out on the balcony," said Richard, with an eager undercurrent in his voice. "That lookout tower of yours has been wooing me ever since I first caught sight of it."

"I'm really afraid you wouldn't be comfortable up there," ventured the girl thoughtfully.

"It ain't been used in a dog's age," appended the old man.

This duet of deprecations went on for several moments, while the smiling but determined Richard stood his ground.

"Well," said the girl finally, "there's a bed up there, and I can get Rose Ruby to clean it up this afternoon. Why not take him up to look at it, dad?"

The old man appealed to Richard.

"You see how 'tis! You see who's skipper, don't you? Come along—we'll take a look anyway."

Richard followed him through a cool, spacious hall, up two flights of broad stairs, and then up a third flight shut off from the main body of the house by a door, and shooting up, narrow and almost perpendicular, into a square, low-ceilinged room. Windows, closely shuttered now, looked out from all four walls, and the must and dust of years was in the stale air.

"Wait till I open a blind, so as we can see a thing or two."

The old man fumbled for the nearest window.

One after another he flung them open, and spread the blinds wide, while Richard stood near the door watching the old room lift itself from the shroud of darkness that had enveloped it.

"There, now, and here's a door out to the balcony. Like as not the bed's hard as nails."

But Richard had stepped through the narrow doorway. For a dumb, crowded moment he stood with his hand on the corroded iron rail. Below him, the yellow road he had traveled fell away in a gentle slope from the main highway to the water's edge, burning its purposeful way past the squatting fishermen's cottages as if impatient of their stoic quiescence. To the south lay the Sound, embellished by an irregular fringe of beach that traced the shore to the east and west. Four miles out, Shipton Island Light reared itself like an admonishing finger over the vicious shoals on which it was built.

"Them islands athwart the light there—Thimble Islands, we call 'em—they're perilous mean fer a skipper that don't know these waters."

"Thimble Islands!" repeated Richard absently, for the beauty of the scene stretching away beneath him had left him without words.

"Ye can see nigh to New London with the glasses," said the old man. "That's the way my mother kept her eagle eye on my father after he'd got beyond reach of her voice!"

His voice drawled on, the words blurring into a good-natured drone that swelled suddenly into an announcement.

"Stayton—Peter Stayton—that's my name, friend, same as my grandfather who built this house. You've heard of him, mebbe—him that built the fust salmon

wheel in New England, and spliced it onto his sloop, the old *Dorcas*."

Richard's eyes met the bright-blue gaze that gimleted into his own. He held out his hand.

"You'll overlook my absent-mindedness, won't you? I should have introduced myself long before this." He stopped abruptly, his glance still held by those expectant, blue eyes, and he drew a deep breath before he spoke again. "Mr. Stayton, I have as much reason to be proud of the name I bear as you have; but just at present, for various reasons—none of them vicious, I assure you—I should like to discard it. Understand, you don't have to agree to this. I can furnish you with all the facts you want; but—will you take me on faith, my friend, as Smith or Brown or Jones? It's nothing more or less than a whim, but I should appreciate it if you felt you could humor me."

Old Peter Stayton rocked gently from heel to toe—his invariable habit when he was debating on weighty matters; but the eyes that impaled Richard's did not withdraw their steady gaze.

"I've come out here to rest," Richard went on gravely. "I've been part of the mad scramble in town for more than ten years, and now that I've shaken all that off"—he smiled wanly—"well, it seems to me that if I drag an intrinsic part of myself into my retreat here, some of the sediment of the city is bound to adhere to it. I'd like to come into your household as you might once have picked me up at sea—stripped."

"Hm!" grunted the old man judicially. "Come out here to rest up, have ye?"

"Yes."

"What be ye, in the city?"

"A banker," said Richard, lumping his manifold interests into an understandable word.

"Rich?"

The word was put soberly enough, and Richard considered it with due gravity.

"I suppose you would call me rich—yes."

"You say you got papers and things with you?"

"In my bags at the station."

"We-ell," drawled Peter, "I've lived nigh on to sixty years, and I ain't never been took in yet. I've yet to be deceived by a face, and I liked yourn the fust minute I clapped eyes on it." He held out his hand solemnly, but deep in his twinkling eyes the light of a long, quiescent gambling spirit gleamed. "I'll take ye on your own terms, young feller. Brown, ye say, or Jones, maybe? Brown comes easier to say. Brown it'll be, hey?"

Richard's hand was once more taken into the horny grip of his host. As they pumped arms genially, he had the sense of a lifting weight—a sense of floating free from the cluttered débris of his past.

CHAPTER III

PEACE

THE voice of the girl followed him up to those buoyant heights, rising clear and authoritative from the stair well.

"Dinner's ready! Don't dally until it gets cold, father!"

Peter's grin vanished beneath his straggling mustache.

"Brown, remember," he said portentously. "Better not let on to Dorcas that it ain't your real name. No tellin' how she'd take it. She's a tartar, that girl o' mine!"

The kitchen table was laid for three, and the savory odor of broiling fish permeated the room. The girl's light frock was covered by a checkered apron, her cheeks were flushed, and little beads of perspiration sprinkled her nose and forehead. She smiled up at Richard, in the act of setting a covered vegetable dish on the table.

"Did the tower room come up to your expectations?"

"It surpassed them," he said. "I'm only afraid you'll never be able to get me out of it!"

Peter broke in with a significant cough behind his hand.

"Dorcas, this is Mr. Brown. That's his name—Brown." His eyelid dropped with elaborate cunning

over his eye. "Kin, likely, to old Ebenezer Brown that settled up New London, back in '86, eh?"

Richard moved hurriedly toward the girl, his lips twitching.

"Miss Stayton, this is an occasion for rejoicing with me."

She gave him her hand, after brushing it lightly against her apron, and returned his grip with her warm, firm clasp.

"I hope you will like it here," she said primly, and broke into a sudden laugh. "As master of ceremonies, father is marvelous, don't you think?"

Her laugh removed the last vestige of restraint, and they seated themselves at the table amid a gay babble of small talk.

"Swordfish!" remarked Peter with gusto, and helped Richard with lavish bounty.

It proved to be a jovial dinner, the first of the sort that Richard had ever participated in, with the heaped dishes on the table, and the coffee bubbling in an old granite pot on the range a dozen feet away. It was decided that young Ross Leete should be sent for the bags and trunk at the station, and bring them down in a hired jitney. Rose Ruby—who, it appeared, was servant in general to the entire village—would be delegated to put the tower room in order.

His bags came that afternoon, marshaled by a gangling boy, and the indispensable Rose Ruby appeared soon after. Richard was squatting contentedly on his trunk when she came into the room—a tattered scarecrow of an old woman, with a hooked nose that threatened her chin when she grinned at him, displaying an irregular series of pointed, yellow teeth.

She surveyed Richard from the doorway, leaning, like some outlandish harridan, on her broom, before she favored him with one of her devastating smiles.

"Howdy? Pete says you aim to stop here a while."

"Yes," said Richard. "Not a bad place to stop, is it?" he added pleasantly.

She cackled knowingly.

"Oh, I know better places—more lively. I wuz to Coney Island wunst."

"No! And how did you like it?"

"It was grand!" She rolled her eyes in a reminiscent transport. "All them lights and bands! You ever been to Coney Island?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

"Ain't it grand, now?" She sobered. "Be you a painter?"

"No—oh, no," he assured her.

"There was one here wunst," she confided. "He used to go down on the beach an' paint when there wasn't nothin' *there* to paint." She cackled again at the memory. "I like to split my sides laughin' at that painter."

Richard drifted out to the balcony, in self-defense. He had still to appraise Rose Ruby at her proper worth. As village quidnunc, the old woman was possessed of a shrewd sagacity and rich suspicion, and these qualities imbued her most prosaic days with plenty of color.

By evening the tower room was clean and comfortable. Dorcas herself spread the bed with immaculate sheets smelling faintly of cedar, and tucked in the sides with brisk, deft movements. A chest of dull, old mahogany drawers held his water pitcher and bowl. A cabriolet, slightly battered, but not violated by paint or polish, braided rugs on the floor,

a shelf for his books—these constituted the other furnishings of the room.

Moving awkwardly about, his eyes ever wandering to the fascinations of the view beyond his windows, Richard protested at the girl's turning housemaid for him.

"But Rose Ruby couldn't make up a bed that would stay put until morning," she told him, smiling fleetingly up at him. "She's very much impressed since she knows you've been to Coney Island."

They both laughed at this.

"You see, she went there on her wedding trip, I don't know *how* long ago."

"And you?" asked Richard amusedly "Have you ever been to Coney?"

"Never," she admitted, and her eyes danced; "but I've seen the Woolworth Building and Grant's Tomb."

"Ah, you have been to New York!"

"As a graduation present from dad," she said. "I had a dreadful time keeping him away from the water front!"

There was a freshness of appeal about her which broke through the bulwark of silence that Richard had intended to preserve as self-protection. He found himself drawing her out, while he reveled in the abundant vigor of her slender figure and capable little hands. She had, it appeared, attended normal school in New Haven, with a view to teaching, but had left at the end of her sophomore year.

"Father needed me," was her simple explanation of that.

"He's been retired for some time?"

"Since I was born—and my mother died."

The brief history explained the girl's correct vo-

cabulary. Richard marveled at her apparent contentment—marveled, too, at the refractory tendrils of brown hair that clung in little curls to her damp forehead.

"We'll have supper at six," she told him, with a cursory glance of satisfaction about the room. "I expect it seems odd to you, having dinner in the middle of the day; but we prefer it, because it gets the heaviest work disposed of early."

That night Richard dragged the Queen Anne chair out on the balcony, lit a cigarette, and relaxed. There was no moon, but the brilliant stars were doing their best to make up for this deprivation. They seemed to hang just over the top of the superannuated horse-chestnut trees that sentineled the lawn. The sea lay beyond, a black, vast void, with the light from Ship-ton Island sending its staccato wink coquettishly forth to delight passing liners. Over all lay the faint splash and suck of water and the plaintive chorus of frog and kingfisher.

The future? Richard Brown had no future. The present hour—this was his!

CHAPTER IV

DISCOVERY

WITH a swift adaptability born of his eagerness, Richard fell in with the pleasant, uneventful routine of the Stayton household. It was a routine of homely duties about the house and garden—duties which occasionally extended to the beach as well.

Half a mile offshore, a dozen red-and-white floats marked the presence of old Peter's lobster crates. With a pair of high boots and khaki trousers, bought at the general store to replace the knickers he had brought, Richard often accompanied his host in the dirty, flat-bottomed rowboat to haul in the lobsters. He learned to haul in and lift out the struggling green captives, to toss in a new supply of hermits, and to comment judiciously on the size of the haul.

Occasionally, too, they went off fishing, anchoring near the shoals and drop-lining for blackfish and flounder. These they carried proudly home to Dorcas, who would compliment them on their skill, to the tune of Peter's aggrieved complaint that a man of his years and experience should stoop to such a senile pastime.

"Anglin' like a half-wit over the side of a boat!" he would grumble, while his little, deep-set eyes danced and his horny fingers jerked self-consciously at the ends of his mustache.

It was a delightful game that the girl and her

father played. Richard's amusement was a blend of envy for their contentment and tenderness toward the transparency of their pretended disagreements.

Then there were the evenings when they would walk to the village for the evening mail—which consisted of the New York paper that Dorcas insisted upon subscribing for. Occasionally, in the stiffly proper parlor, with its broad stretch of patterned carpet, its plush lambrequins, and straight-backed chairs and albums, Dorcas would open the little rosewood organ and drag her father, reluctant, protesting, but immensely pleased, to the plush-covered stool.

"Now, father—no hymns!" she would admonish. "Let's have 'Old Uncle Ned,' or 'Sarah's Young Man.'"

"Listen to her!" Peter would command Richard. "A pagan that girl is—that's what!"

To all this homely routine, Dorcas Stayton added a dash and tang of color—the dash and tang of vibrant youth and beauty, and unvarying sweetness of temper; but Richard had been in Standish some three weeks before he became acquainted with the girl as an entity, so closely had she associated herself in his mind with the house, the dinner table, and old Peter.

He had wandered vaguely around a curve in the beach on an afternoon in July, when he came upon a narrow salt inlet that wound into the swamps of beach grass. He followed its course aimlessly until he espied a bright checkered frock and saw the girl shoving off a small, round-bottomed skiff.

"Ahoy, Miss Stayton!" he called.

"Ahoy there, Mr. Brown!" she returned merrily.

He paused beside the boat, which was almost hidden by the tall grass.

"This looks very furtive to me," he chided. "Are you going down to the sea in ships?"

"I do, often," she told him, smiling up from beneath the crude farmer's hat that she had tied, for safety's sake, beneath her chin.

"Do you take passengers?"

"Only useful passengers," she said. "If you'll take the rudder, you may come for a cruise."

He promptly bounded into the boat.

"No sooner said than done! But why not let me row?"

"Because that's my job," she told him. "It keeps me fit, and I love to row."

She settled herself amidships and pushed off with an oar.

"This little skiff is my pet," she confided. "Dad had it made for me. Isn't it a dear?"

Richard nodded. His eyes were following the grace and skill with which she dipped and pulled at her oars. She seemed utterly devoid of self-consciousness or coquetry, though her self-reliance had cost her none of her inherent femininity. Here were no languishing glances, no calculated lift of lips or arching of brows. Her widely spaced, gray eyes met his evenly, and her smile was rare and genuine enough to be ineffably enchanting when it came.

"Steer for the little rock island due south," she commanded. In the next breath she added: "You're looking much fitter, Mr. Brown."

"I hadn't known that I wasn't looking fit," he rejoined lazily.

"You looked—well"—she paused for the right word—"shopworn when you came. You know what I mean, perhaps—so many city people look that way.

Their eyes get sort of blurred, like a mirror when it's handled too much."

"I shouldn't wonder if we do," he agreed, a little startled by the young girl's unexpected insight. "In the city, one gets the bloom rubbed off in the shuffle."

"That's it," she said brightly, and added, with a smile: "Well, yours is coming back. Standish, they say, is a wonderful beauty restorer."

Their laughter mingled at that.

"You like Standish?" he asked.

"Oh, I love it!" she cried.

"You don't long, as they say most country-bred girls do, for the bright lights of the city?"

She shook her head gravely.

Richard found himself suddenly confronted by a very attractive anomaly. Here was a girl who slipped into none of the familiar niches occupied by the types he knew. His curiosity stirred. Was her serenity evidence of stupidity? Or, young as she was, had she bridged the perplexities of life and thus achieved her high place of content?

It was a lazy afternoon, an ideal setting for confidences. The little skiff cut sturdily through the gentle swell as they rounded the little island of washed rock.

"I often come out here and read, or just sit and think," she told him. "It's ever so much bigger at low tide."

He looked at the protruding rock with new interest and could picture Dorcas sitting there, the one vivid patch of color in all this gray expanse of water.

"You must bring me out some time when the tide is low," he suggested, and she promised.

"We can't come when it's dead low, or we should have trouble getting ashore again," she told him.

They rowed slowly back, chatting lazily. Richard listened to her quaint observations with growing eagerness. She was so unaffected, so free of self-conceit or rhetorical cant; yet she had proved that she could think and talk. For some reason the discovery elated him. Her beauty, he reflected—for he had just discovered that she was beautiful—would have been enough; but it seemed that she was even more richly endowed.

The sun was beginning to droop sleepily toward the western horizon when they tied the boat and made their way over the fields toward the white house. As they walked, Richard was conscious of the girl's graceful, unmincing stride, and of the luminous vitality that seemed to emanate from her in a sort of aura.

"Dad must have gone to town," she said, when they reached the back door and saw no signs of the familiar figure in the garden or pottering about the girl's namesake, the captive boat. She laughed mischievously. "I'll hurry supper and pretend he's late. Then *he* can pretend he's being abused!"

"Then let me help," pleaded Richard, catching her playful spirit.

She unearthed a second apron from a drawer, and turned to him.

"Now, turn around!"

He obeyed.

"Lift up your arms!"

He did so. Her firm, slender, young arms encircled him for an instant as she drew the apron under his armpits. Then he felt her tying it securely between his shoulder blades.

Her touch, light and inconsequential as it was, invested him with an odd exhilaration. He was aware of a swift throb in his throat. It was as if some intangible mist had lifted from the world, leaving it crystal clear and luminous.

"There!" she said.

He whirled on her. They stood for a moment, smiling into each other's eyes, before the girl moved off in her matter-of-fact way, still laughing at Richard over her shoulder.

"The knives and forks are in the table drawer. The plates are in the pantry—the supper plates, not the big ones. Let's hurry!"

"You bet!"

"Better not be too rambunctious, or you'll break those plates," she warned, laughing across at him from the stove.

"Let's!" he cried. "Let's break one—just one, to celebrate!"

She gave him a shocked frown.

"To celebrate what?" she asked incredulously. "How fearfully extravagant! To celebrate what?"

"Oh—why, just to celebrate," he said, and lowered the plate with a sheepish grin to its place on the table.

What was he saying? Why should he celebrate? He fumbled about in his mind for the answer. He found it, and took a few silent dance steps on the rug.

He had it! He was happy—that was it, happy! He didn't know why, but he was happy!

CHAPTER V

CONTINUED HAPPINESS

RICHARD was amazed and a little awed, on awaking the following morning, to find that his inexplicable ecstasy still held. He had fought sleep far into the night, with the fear that he would wake to find that exquisite rapture gone, like Aladdin's castle; but his sleep had been dreamless, and he woke to a world bathed in a wondrous light.

He bounded out of bed and strode to the balcony, where he stood in his pajamas, drinking in the salt air and feasting his eyes on the green beauty spread out beneath him.

The sound of a dozen motor boats, starting out from the sluice to explore lobster pots, reached him faintly. What vigorous beauty there was in the sound! He felt the sudden urge to speak. It was almost as if he were being called upon, like some penitent at a revival meeting, to testify to the miracle that had happened to him. He was happy!

Leaping down the stairs to his breakfast, he found Dorcas busy making toast and old Peter squatting on the doorstep, whittling a piece of wood.

"Good morning! And what a morning!" he cried.

The girl gave him one of her swift, buoyant smiles. Her father turned lazily.

"No breakfast yet, mate! That girl's slow as molasses. She does it jest to pester me, I know!"

"Now, dad, you hush, or you'll get no breakfast," she commanded.

"You see!" He laid his plight before the smiling Richard. "You see what a daughter she is to me!"

"I see that you're a fraud, Peter Stayton," Richard said, beaming down cheerfully upon the squat figure. "That's what *you* are—a fraud!"

The old man's eyes twinkled.

"You're lookin' perk as a perker, this morning, mate!"

"And feeling perk," added Richard. "Do we haul lobsters to-day?"

"Oh, I s'pose so, though my back's gone back on me."

When Peter was not complaining of his daughter's lack of filial affection, he was grumbling about his back. With a hand resting plaintively across his spine, he would recount the painful and lasting injury he had suffered in a fall from the rigging, more than twenty years before.

"I come down smack on my heels, like this, and a pain shot up to here." He designated the exact spot. "You'd 'a' thought it would 'a' hurt my heels, wouldn't ye? But no, sir—it settled in my back, that pain did, and now in wet weather——"

"But it's sunny this morning, dad! Come along and dish up!"

"The girl's got no sense o' sympathy," he observed with the greatest relish. "She's cold and heartless. She knows it's rowin' that makes it hurt wuss."

"Then why don't you buy a put-put for your boat, daddy?"

"Think I was made o' money, to hear her, wouldn't ye?"

But he was in the highest good humor at the

breakfast table, and was careful to serve the choicest strips of bacon and the neatest egg to his daughter.

Richard had learned to love the old fisherman, and Peter Stayton's buried little blue eyes dwelt with genuine affection upon the younger man.

"If I'd had a son, I shouldn't 'a' minded if he'd been purty much like you, matey," he was wont to say on those rare occasions when he forgot that he was a fierce old fellow. "But the Lord saw I needed chastenin', and He sent a petticoat to do it," he would wind up, with a lugubrious sigh.

Through the following days Richard's happiness stayed with him, though he kept a doubtful vigilance over it, fearful of its leaving him, fearful of being plunged back into the dark morass of his weary doubts and bitter loneliness.

Summer matured richly. The garden yielded yellow squash, crisp string beans, and an abundance of peas. Richard learned to shell these nicely, sitting on the doorstep, with the girl's encouraging voice urging him on to magnificent effort. The spacious mahogany offices on Broad Street, the old Madison Avenue house, the summer place at East Hampton, his cars, his clubs, and Della—even Della—had assumed the vague unreality of a dream. Only this was real, Standish and old Peter and the girl and the hook-nosed, shrewish Rose Ruby. These were real!

"Jake Stout was tellin' me to-day that Tad Bowen, over to New London, has an engine he wants to sell," Peter remarked one evening. "Seems some city feller bought it off Tad, and then traded it back fer somethin' else."

"Why don't you go up and look at it, daddy?" urged Dorcas, catching the undercurrent of desire in her father's voice. "It might do for your boat."

"Nothin' o' the sort!" protested Peter indignantly.

"And you know you're dying to get up to New London and tell all those old reprobates around the water front what a fine skipper you used to be."

"And you call my friends reprobates! Jest fer that I don't stir a step; and what with my back and all, you can jest take over the rowin' yourself, young woman!"

"All right, dear. You'd only go up there and drink a lot of Tad Bowen's hard cider, and come back with a headache," observed Dorcas casually.

"What?" roared Peter. "Ye impudent little hussy! Accuse me of gettin' drunk, will ye?"

"I didn't say drunk, daddy," corrected the girl innocently.

"No, ye didn't *say* it, but I know what's behind them eyes of yorn! Let me tell ye right now"—he waved his heavy forefinger at her in a beautiful imitation of uncontrollable rage—"I'm a-goin' up to New London fer that engine! Now, we'll see who's cap'n here!"

CHAPTER VI

MALICIOUS VIGIL

AFTER dinner, the following day, Peter doffed his disreputable cap, donned a baggy suit of gray, shaved carefully, and brushed the stubborn bristle of his thin hair wetly against his forehead. Scattering homilies and protestations in his wake, he departed for New London.

Rose Ruby had been called in for the emergency. The old woman was to sleep in the room next to Dorcas, in case Peter should happen not to get back that night.

"Of course," Dorcas told Richard, as they watched the old man off down the hot, yellow road, "he won't be back until to-morrow morning. He knows it, and he knows that I know it, but he always pretends it's an accident, and writes a letter of complaint to the railroad about the poor train service."

"The dear old infant!" The tenderness in Richard's eyes matched the girl's. "He's a wonderful old scout!"

"He's a saint," amended the girl softly.

Richard was suddenly conscious of their complete aloneness at supper that evening. It was the first time they had sat down to a meal without old Peter, and there was enchantment in it. They faced each other across the table, their glances meeting merrily over each mouthful. Richard praised the apple sauce enthusiastically, and was promptly rebuked, since

he had made it himself. He was subdued by this reminder, and licked a smudge of frosting from his finger tips.

"Can't afford to lose a crumb of it," he declared.

They laughed at his greed. Richard had never felt so full of laughter.

"By Jove," he cried, "I have an idea! Suppose you take me out in the skiff to see your own private island! We can watch the sunset on the water, too."

"We'll have to hurry, if we want to see the sunset," she said. "Shall we leave the dishes?"

"Yes, and I'll dry them when we come home."

"I'll do 'em, Dorcas."

It was Rose Ruby from the doorway. The grotesque, bent figure seemed for a moment to have shut out the evening glow behind her. Her nose came down to meet her chin over her yellow smile, and her bright, little eyes regarded them with a sort of baleful relish.

"Oh, it's you, Rose Ruby! Well, come along in—you're just in time." Rose Ruby sidled into the room. "There's some coffee on the stove, if you haven't had your supper, and plenty of biscuits."

Richard felt a distinct sense of relief when they started down the path.

"She's an ugly old customer, that Rose Ruby of yours."

"Oh, she's a good old thing," defended Dorcas. "Of course, she can't help the way she looks."

Which disposed of Rose Ruby. Through the mellow glow of approaching twilight, they trudged down the road to the beach. The tide was full, and the dainty little skiff was well afloat among the beach grass.

"I'm going to row to-night, while you pretend you're a lady of leisure," announced Richard, and Dorcas settled herself with mock docility in the stern. He pulled off. "Make for your rock island, matey!"

"Right-o, cap'n!"

A silence ensued—the silence of dipping oars and the plash of water. Finally Richard said:

"I think, if you'll permit it, I'll stop 'missing' you and call you 'Dorcas.' May I do so?"

She considered this studiously, while her smiling eyes showed a new awareness of him. Then she nodded.

"Of course you may. We *have* been formal, haven't we?"

"Impeccable," he agreed, and added earnestly: "Dorcas, your star boarder's name is 'Richard.' "

"I know that," she laughed.

"Do you think you could say it?"

"Perhaps."

"You *are* a sedate little lady!"

"I—sedate!"

This struck them both as immensely preposterous, and they laughed again. Richard had been wanting to laugh this long time. It lent a legitimate outlet for the joy pulsing rapturously within him.

He bent industriously to his oars after this interval, and presently they were alongside the protruding rock. A dozen gulls, perched on its serrated sides, watched them approach with bright, arrogant eyes.

"We'll climb up there and sit down," he said.

"There's not much room."

"There's enough," he assured her.

They felt the skiff's keel grate on the rocks. Rich-

ard hopped out and pulled the nose of the boat after him.

"Now, give me your hand and—jump!"

The next instant the girl was standing beside him.

"She's in shallow water," Dorcas told him. "When the tide turns, she'll be left high and dry, so we mustn't stay out here too long."

"Oh, we can get her off, all right!"

They scrambled to the pinnacle of the rocks, laughing, exulting in their adventure. Richard spread his coat for Dorcas to sit on, and they settled themselves side by side, their arms hugging their huddled knees.

The sun had left them, and the western horizon and the distant shore of the mainland were washed in brilliant color. With her chin resting on her locked fingers, the girl sat brooding, while Richard regarded her contentedly.

There was something almost poignantly young about her, with her bright hair rippling about her temples and clinging to her slender throat. She was a beautiful girl, he decided dispassionately, and presently she would be a beautiful woman. She needed no subtle artifices. How many women would look as enchanting in a gingham frock?

"Look!" she commanded softly.

He followed her glance, and saw that the moon, which had been hovering pallidly above them, was now riding forth, seeming to preen herself as she brightened. In the paler light, the circle about them seemed to decrease. Their world grew smaller, more intimate.

"It's as if we were in a royal tent and this was

the throne," mused Richard, quite under the spell of the night.

"Like some ancient king," supplemented the girl, smiling.

"And his queen," added Richard promptly.

"A queen in a gingham dress?" she scoffed.

He turned to her, a gallant retort on his lips, but it died stillborn. His eyes met hers, wide, luminous, with a little abstracted smile in their depths. His face sobered. A puzzled wonder replaced his jovial grin—a wonder that merged into a startled horror. The inexplicable ecstasy that had seemed to emanate from all the subtle forces of nature around him, the rapture that had colored his world during these last few weeks, drained itself slowly, relentlessly into the depths of those serene eyes, leaving him stripped and chilly.

He dragged his eyes away, to stare out over the flat expanse of water, and over a world bereft of life and color, even as he was bereft. He understood now the secret of his ecstasy. Dorcas! And he had not even guessed that he loved her. Loved her! He, Della's husband, he who had no right to love any one!

"I think we had better start back. I'm afraid it'll be pretty dark as it is."

Her voice seemed to come from a great distance, from the inaccessible place to which she had retreated now that he understood. He dared not look at her, but he said unsteadily:

"Oh, let's not go yet. The moon will think we're deserting her."

"But it's getting dark."

"You're not afraid?"

"Of course not."

"Then"—he forced the words to come playfully—"let's stay out a bit longer, and pretend that this is our particular tent."

When it was dark enough for him to see only the pallid outline of her face, he turned to her and began to talk feverishly, about the night, the moon, the city—anything, so that he might keep her there, so that he might listen to her voice and watch the movement of her lips.

He was aware that this was the end—that he must leave Standish, must place miles and more miles between himself and the agonizing sweetness of her presence; but he would take enough of her away with him to last forever. He would tuck it away deep, deep, secure from the sordid contacts of life. Sometimes, in the lonely years ahead, he could take out his memories and feast upon them, as one pores over some faintly fragrant album.

For some reason which neither could have explained, their voices were hushed. Once Richard changed his position. In moving, he felt her bare forearm against his sleeve. The contact left him shaken. He told himself that he must not touch her; but her voice, her nearness—these he might take.

"We must start," she said again. "I'm afraid it's awfully late."

But he refused to consult his watch. To-morrow he must go, but to-night—surely no one would begrudge him this much!

So they stayed on, while the moon moved in her slow arc, and a chill breeze blew up out of the east. At last she rose, stiffly, purposefully.

"Goodness, I've been sitting in one position for so long that I'm all kinky!"

Their laughter was a little strained.

"Must we go?" he said wanly.

"Goodness, yes—and look!" A hundred feet of rock lay between them and the open water, and perched midway was the skiff. "Low tide!" she cried. "Now we've done it!"

"Oh, we can get her off," Richard assured her.

But dragging the boat across that jagged slope proved no easy task. They began by lifting her outright, but she was a stout little craft, and the girl's strength did not match her willingness.

"You sit down and boss the job," Richard commanded, and set to work alone.

He accomplished a foot or so at each effort, while Dorcas encouraged him from her perch on the rock. They launched her finally, after more than half an hour's work, and climbed in, panting.

"Now we'll both row back," announced the girl firmly, "because we shall be pulling against the tide, and that's hard work. We must be careful of the rocks on the way, too."

If it was hard work, Richard was unconscious of the fact. He knew only that Dorcas was beside him, that her long, clean strokes matched his, that they were pulling together with perfect accord. There was a sharp sweetness in this fact—it would swell his album of memories.

"I should have known better than to stay out so late," she said, and her self-reproach was shot through with a puzzled wonder at her strange forgetfulness. "It isn't as if I didn't know about the tides and all."

"Oh, we'll be home presently," Richard assured her. "I hope you're not worried about having stayed late. I should feel very guilty if you were."

"No, I don't think it matters," she mused. "Of

course, if dad had been home, he'd have been fearfully upset."

The stars had begun to pale when they approached the beach. Richard wondered vaguely where the hours had gone. It had seemed so short, their last night together, and yet dawn could not be far distant.

He was conscious of a sharp stab of guilt when they found that their worst problem was before them. The tide had left the little inlet dry, and in vain they pulled out of one muddy shallow, only to run aground in another.

"I'm afraid it's dead low," the girl said finally. "There's no place here where we can put ashore, if it is. We had better row up to the sluice."

The moon had strutted off, leaving the stars in full command; and these were already winking sleepily out when Richard made out the cluster of boats and the wharf ahead. They tied the skiff among her larger sisters, and climbed the wooden steps leading to the road. They started walking swiftly, for the sluice was a good half mile from the old Stayton house.

"What would dad say," asked the girl, with a nervous laugh, "if he knew I'd been out this late—almost all night?"

"He'd be sure to understand," said Richard reassuringly.

"But dad knows that I know the tides," she told him.

Richard's guilt was overwhelming him.

"I'm fearfully sorry," he said. "I don't know why I was such a thoughtless brute!"

"But it was my fault as much as yours."

She stumbled against him, and he crooked his arm.

"You're tired, too. Take my arm, and we'll make better time."

She slipped her hand under his arm, and he felt it pressing warmly against his side—felt it with a strange, detached sweetness, for in his heart he had already said good-by to her.

Through the rising mists of the oncoming dawn they trudged down the road. Presently the sun would rise, as it had risen yesterday, and the world would yawn and stretch itself, pick up the threads it had dropped the night before, and do the same thing over and over with its vast, immutable serenity.

"What time is it, please?" she asked, when the house loomed ahead mistily.

"Nearly three, Dorcas."

She gasped as they started slowly up the gravel walk toward the back door. With his hand on the knob, he turned to her. Her buoyant self-reliance had deserted her. In the pale light she looked like a sleepy, befuddled child. Her hair and frock were rumpled and her eyes drooping.

"You're not sorry, Dorcas?" Richard gently asked her. "Or shall I apologize for keeping you out like this?"

"But you didn't," she protested. "It was my fault, too." She appealed to him, with the ghost of her merry smile coming into her eyes. "I don't know why I stayed on like that, except that it seemed as if I must—as if I couldn't leave. It was so beautiful, wasn't it?"

"So beautiful," he murmured, "that I shall never forget it—never! Good night, Dorcas!"

"Good morning, rather—Richard!" she rejoined, and tiptoed across the dim kitchen toward the stairs.

They felt their way up the stairs, and exchanged an-

other good night at her door before she slipped inside and closed it softly. As she closed it, another door down the hall opened swiftly, and Rose Ruby's face appeared in the aperture like a disembodied mask, her hooked nose and sharp chin meeting over her yellow smile.

For a moment the old woman hovered in the shadow, listening to Richard's fumbling steps coming from the tower stairs, and to the cautious movements of the girl in the next room. Then she disappeared, as quietly and as swiftly as she had appeared, like a triumphant *Judy* hauled in by the marionette operator from behind.

CHAPTER VII

SUSPICION

OLD Peter returned, grumbling but enormously pleased with himself, on an early train the next day. He was voluble and bitter in his complaints about the train service.

"And what's my girl been a-doin' with herself?" he finished.

"This is Friday, daddy. What would I be doing but cleaning the parlor?"

"Now look here—why don't ye get Rose Ruby to do that, like I been tellin' ye to?"

"She doesn't do it to suit me."

"A reg'lar old maid!" he accused fondly.

"And we could have some lettuce and tomatoes for dinner, if there was only some one to pick them," she mused.

Peter bristled.

"Now listen, young woman! I want to splice that engine on an'——"

"But that'll wait! Do go and find me some tomatoes—nice red ones!"

He held her off, taking a long breath in preparation for the harangue he was longing to deliver; but he spoke solicitously instead.

"You're lookin' peaked, kitten. Ain't sick, be ye?"

"You know I'm never sick, dad."

"Look peaked, all the same," said the old man ob-

stinately, and started for the door. "If you don't put that lazy bag o' bones to work, I will!"

He bent to his task in the garden, soothed by the spicy scent of the tomato vines, chuckling to himself as he peered beneath the leaves.

He was twisting an enormous red tomato from its stalk when he was conscious of a shadow falling on the green leaves before him. He raised his head to meet the cunning, myopic gaze of Rose Ruby.

"Blame me! How'd *you* get there? You get inside in a hurry, and help Dorcas with her cleanin'."

"I guess like she needs help to-day," grinned Rose Ruby, without moving.

"She always needs it, and that's what I pay you fer, see? Get, now!"

"But to-day"—the old woman produced one of her inimitable grins—"I s'pect she needs it more'n mostly. So would you, if you hadn't had no sleep!"

"No sleep?" He rested back on his heels, peering up at her anxiously. "Didn't Dorcas sleep last night? Were she sick?"

"How do I know?"

"Well, hang it, don't ye?"

"How could I, when I warn't there to see?"

"But see here, ye rattlin' bag of bones, I told ye stay to my house all night, 'cause I might not get back. I *didn't* get back, and——"

"An' so I did. I stayed all night," said Rose Ruby, with a cackle. "I wuz there!"

"Well, then——"

"But Dorcas, she warn't!"

"Warn't what?"

"Warn't here—in the house."

Peter rose slowly to his feet, more puzzled than disturbed at this curious recital.

"What do ye mean? If she weren't in the house last night, where was she?"

"How should I know?"

He made a swift lunge toward the old harridan.

"Blame me if I——"

"Well, how *should* I?" repeated Rose Ruby, backing away from him. "I only know she come in nigh onto sunup—dawn, it was."

He regarded her blankly for a moment, his little, bright eyes almost disappearing in the confused cloud that enveloped him. Rose Ruby was quick to follow up the advantage his silence gave her.

"They was somewhere all night—I don't know where they was."

"They?" echoed Peter.

"Dorcas an' that man in the tower—the boarder—*Mr. Brown.*"

The great frame towered there for a moment as quiescent as the immutable serenity about him. Then the old woman's words shaped themselves into hideous form. His body began to heave and his arms shot up and out.

"I'll kill ye fer that!" he shouted. "I'll kill ye fer that, ye lyin', blasphemin' old hag! I'll kill ye!"

She moved off, keeping her eyes on his distorted face, and moving her cracked lips in a perfectly frenzy of triumph.

"I tell ye it's the truth! Didn't I see 'em come in with my own eyes, nigh to dawn? Didn't I see 'em comin' down the road arm in arm? If ye don't believe me, go up to the sluice—her boat's there. Warn't low tide at three this mornin'? An' would she take her boat 'way up to the sluice if she could 'a' brought it back to the beach? Don't that prove

I ain't lyin'? Go up to the sluice an' see fer yourself, if you don't believe me!"

"I'll kill ye—kill ye!" he was muttering, but the words were mechanical.

"I tell ye it's so! She was out all night with that man, an' the whole town'll be talkin' about it soon!"

He made a dozen futile efforts to speak, and at last the words scraped their way up from his throat.

"Then it's because ye told 'em. Ye lie! I'll kill ye!"

She turned and hurried through the garden and across the fields toward her crazy little shack, with her ragged skirt flapping about her bony limbs, and her yellow smile much in evidence.

Peter paused within a few feet of the white fence that girdled his garden, and stood with the strained, insensible immobility of a mechanical toy suddenly run down. His senses were floundering uncertainly among the morass of words that had fallen from the old woman's mouth. He would kill her!

What had the old hag said about the sluice? That the skiff was there. Well, if it was there, it meant that she couldn't get to the beach because it was low tide. Low tide was at three o'clock in the morning, or between three and four.

He was striding now, still without the consciousness that he was moving, down the road. He covered it with great, long paces, the visor of his old cap standing out over one ear. Neighbors called to him as he passed the cottages, but he did not hear. It was as if all the enginery of his mind had stopped until he could prove the fallacy of the old hag's tale.

At the bend in the road he quickened his steps.

Not in years had he walked so rapidly, and his heart was pounding.

A few fishermen were about the wooden wharf, pottering with their boats. Peter returned their greetings mechanically. His eyes flashed over the tied cluster of boats, and, through a speckled red haze, came to rest finally on his daughter's skiff.

"Hear ye went up to New London to buy a engine off Tad Bowen yestiddy," ventured Tim Woodhouse, who was industriously scraping off his lobster crates.

But Peter was already making his way back up the road, cursing at the zigzag curves that had suddenly appeared in it.

"Guess old Pete must 'a' been dippin' into Tad's cider pretty good," hazarded Tim, and went back to his crates with a chuckle.

It was a long walk back to the white house. The sun poured hotly down upon the old man's head, and the way was strangely beset with twists and turns. The neighbors, seeing him stagger past, nodded sagely. Old Pete Stayton off on a spree at his age!

The sun could do queer things to a man. It seemed to set things on fire in him. Queer thoughts flared up—thoughts of the old gun propped on the mantel behind the stove. It was a good gun!

Well, her boat had been in the sluice. She had been out all night with the boarder—with Mr. Brown, as he called himself; but his real name wasn't Brown. Well, it didn't matter now. Peter gave vent to a sinister, unholy chuckle.

He was nearing the house, lying calm and white and tranquil in the midday peace. Something of his sanity returned to him at sight of its familiar lines. For nearly two hundred years it had stood there. It had harbored his father, and his father's father be-

fore that. Never had doubt or suspicion found the Stayton home a salutary breeding spot—never until now!

He brought up short before the house, shaking, half mad, his thoughts rushing wildly ahead to the gun that lay behind the stove. Caution, he told himself—he must use caution!

Dorcas met him at the door, and raised horrified hands at sight of him. The perspiration was rolling down from under the old man's cap and trickling from the end of his nose. His little eyes were threaded with skeins of blood, and his hands were shaking.

"Father, now *where* have you been? Here I send you out to pick tomatoes, and you go traipsing off to town or somewhere—and dinner getting cold!"

"Hello, cap'n!" greeted Richard, from the table. "Dorcas and I thought you were lost."

So the stranger called her "Dorcas" now, did he?

"No, I warn't lost."

Peter was oddly subdued. He went to the sink, washed his hands, and splashed water on his hot face.

"Now, father, do hurry!"

"I'm comin', girl—I'm comin'."

He sat down, and she brought him a heaped plate from the oven, where she had been keeping it warm.

"Richard picked the tomatoes, or we'd have had none." So it was "Richard" now, was it? "And some clumsy creature has been trampling down some of our best vines, too!"

Peter made a pretense of eating, and moved his knife and fork about his plate with quite a clatter, but this did not deceive the girl.

"Daddy, I'm afraid you celebrated too much last night."

"Oh, ye think so, do ye?"

He was careful not to raise his eyes from the table.

"You're not eating your dinner."

"Oh, I'm eatin' enough."

He realized now that his guest was unusually quiet, and spoke very softly, very suavely.

"Ye don't seem very chipper to-day, Mr. Brown. Ain't feelin' bad, be ye?"

Richard's eyes wandered past the girl, past her father, to the fields beyond. The old pinched look of frustration was about his thin lips.

"I'm none too chipper, cap'n," he said evenly. "You see, the fact is, I shall have to be getting back to the city very soon. I find that I must leave your fair village to-morrow."

Peter's fork fell with a clatter to his plate. It was like a sharp cry in that wilderness of silence. After a moment the old man raised his eyes furtively, and saw that his daughter's color had faded, that her eyes were wide and startled.

"You're—going away?" she faltered thinly.

Richard nodded, apparently absorbed in his plate.

"Oh, be ye, Mr. Brown?" asked Peter gently. "Be ye, now?"

"Lord knows I don't want to," said Richard, with an effort to make his voice sound casual and hearty. "I can't tell you how happy I've been here with you. I don't think I've ever been happier anywhere; but"—he shrugged—"we can't be happy all the time, I suppose, and I must get back to my duties in town."

Peter was nodding thoughtfully, and once or twice his eyes wandered to the mantel behind the range.

When Dorcas began to clear the table, Peter stood in the doorway, his lips and fingers moving uselessly, his eyes on those approaching clouds. So the stranger was going away, was he, going back to the city, leaving his girl stripped of her good name and of her happiness?

Dorcas was moving silently and with lagging steps about her work. That was what they always did, the city man and the country girl. Then, suddenly, Peter was lashing himself with reproaches. It was his fault! He had taken the man in—a stranger, just for a whim. He had exposed his daughter to the danger of that daily contact. *He* was to blame!

What was there to do, save kill the man? His head swam. What did the Bible say? "Thou shalt not kill!"

Suddenly he laughed. It was a ghastly sound breaking through the girl's preoccupation. She turned toward him quickly.

"Did you speak, father?"

"Yes," he said, and laughed again. "Yes, I spoke, Dorie. I was jest rememberin' that I had some business uptown. I'll be back fer supper, though."

"But it's going to storm, dear."

"Yes," assented Peter softly. "You're right, girl. It do look like dirty weather."

A moment later he was plodding up the road. Behind him the marshaled clouds advanced. A chuckle churned its way up through his throat. A fine night it would be! A fine night for a wedding—for such a wedding!

CHAPTER VIII

PREPARATIONS

THE village lay in the ominous hush of the approaching storm. The elms about the common were motionless, their leaves drooping. It was as if the town held its breath, conserving its strength to combat the elemental furies that would soon be unleashed upon it.

Peter struck off across the common, returning with an automatic nod of his lowered head the jovial greetings that bombarded him. Down Maple Street he hurried, and up the steps of an ancient stone house affixed to an equally ancient church by an ivy-grown ligament.

"I want to see Mr. Beckwith, ma'am," he announced to the plump old housekeeper who beamed upon him from the doorway. "Jest tell him it's Pete Stayton who's come on a little matter of business—important business."

She led him into a dim parlor—a square, spacious, low-ceilinged room whose Colonial hauteur had been subject to the spasmodic improvements of the ambitious years until now its character was blended of half a dozen eras. The huge old fireplace was boarded up, and its mantel was very nearly concealed by a pompous, round-bellied stove. Figured carpet stretched brightly over the wide floor boards; golden oak stared impudently at mellow mahogany. A bunch of dried cat-tails, tied with faded yellow ribbon, stood in one corner.

"Well, Pete, how are you? Sophie told me your business was important, and I said to myself, 'Well, have old Pete's sins been riding him too hard?'"

They clasped hands warmly. Mr. Beckwith was a small, withered man with a bristling, bustling manner that grew more marked with the years, as if to offer tangible proof of the superiority of spirit over matter.

He regarded Peter with a twinkle in his merry, brown eyes, his hand pawing at his streaked beard, in anticipation of some peppery controversy, but his mirth found no reflection in that somber gaze.

"It ain't my sins that have brought me up here, parson," Peter explained quietly. "It's a—it's a weddin'."

"A wedding!" gushed the little parson. "A wedding! No! Not yours, Pete, after all these years? Don't tell me you've gone and——"

"No, no—ye know it ain't me!" Peter was trying desperately to rise to the minister's waggish mood. "It's Dorcas—my daughter."

"Dorcas! You don't say!" It was a cry of genuine delight.

"Yes," said Peter. "She's goin' to be married."

"Well, sit down, man. Sit down and tell me—who's the lucky man, and when is the wedding to be?"

Peter eased himself slowly into a plush-covered chair, spread his great, knobby hands on his knees, and bent forward.

"It—it's a city man's been stoppin' with us this summer. Likely ye've seen him around the village sometimes. And the weddin'—it's to-night."

"To-night?"

"To-night," Peter carefully repeated.

"But, man, why didn't you let me know before? When did they decide to get married? When did they get the license?"

"License!" repeated Peter, and again, with dawning alarm: "License! Why, they ain't got one. They—well, they jest decided to get married—jest this morning."

"Oh, well, then"—Mr. Beckwith thrust his hands deep into his pockets, swung one short leg over the other, and smiled genially upon his guest—"there won't be any wedding *this* night. Seems to me, Pete, you're in a blessed hurry to get rid of your only child. Fine paternal attitude, I must say! But it won't work."

"Won't work!" Peter swallowed hard, striving to preserve his fixed smile. "Ye mean ye won't marry 'em to-night?"

"How can I? They've got to have a license. What's more, they've got to have it four or five days before I can perform the ceremony. That's the law, and you know it, Pete."

"But they can't! They can't wait, parson." Peter's lips were twitching under the ragged mustache. "They got to be married to-night."

"But I've just told you, Pete——"

"I don't care what ye jest told me," he bellowed. "Don't go talkin' to me about the law! Where's the law, when it comes to some of these here hurry-up weddin's and deathbed marriages you're always hearin' about, when there warn't no time fer licenses?"

"But those are emergencies. In such cases, when there hasn't been time for proper preparation, it's different—in this State, anyhow. The minister takes the entire responsibility upon himself——"

"There! I told ye!" Peter's hand came thump-

ing down on his knee. "There ain't hardly any law ye can't take a reef in, jest like I said!"

"Sorry, but they'll have to wait and get their license," repeated the minister firmly, though his smile still held. "If it were a case of emergency——"

"Ain't I been tellin' ye that that's jest what it is?"

"No, Pete. You've told me nothing of the sort."

"Well, I tell ye now, then!" roared Peter. When he saw shocked wonder replace the little parson's benignant smile, he resumed his wheedling tone, though his voice shook. "It ain't that I want 'em to get married like this. I don't want to lose my girl; but what ye goin' to do when a young one takes it into her head all of a sudden that she's goin' to get married, an' threatens to go off and have it done by some parson ye don't know? What with him leavin' to-morrow——"

"You mean the young man is going away?"

The minister was regarding Peter intently now, and a trifle sadly. The old fisherman nodded emphatically.

"An' she jest bound to go along," he confided, with every appearance of plaintive resignation.

"Can't he wait for a few days?"

Peter's sly glance noted the breach he had made in the minister's reluctance, and he slipped in another wedge.

"Wait? They won't do it, I tell ye. An' how do I know who's goin' to marry 'em, if they go off like this? What father wants his child traipsin' off to some strange place, an' gettin' married by some strange parson? I can't budge her, she's that set."

"Why does the young man have to leave so suddenly?" asked the parson quietly.

"Some business in the city—somethin' pressin', it

seems; an' if they ain't married to-night, well—— But ye *will* do it fer me, won't ye?"

If Mr. Beckwith saw more than the old man had intended him to see, it was not so much that Peter's dissembling was lacking in finesse as that the clergyman's sagacity had been sharpened by years of conscientious probings. His smile had gone now, and his eyes were grave.

"If the matter were urgent enough——" he began, but Peter swept down upon the words.

"It is, man! Heaven knows I wouldn't ask it of ye if it—if I—well, if it warn't. I promise ye, ye won't be sorry. I want them young folks to be married to-night under my own roof, and I want ye to do the business. Ye'll never regret it—never!"

The room was dim with the false, gray twilight of the hastening storm.

"Well, Pete," said the minister, after another moment of silence, "I'll do it. I'll come along down as soon as I've had my supper. Will that do?"

"That'll do fine, parson!"

The little minister followed Pete to the door. Up and down the wide street the leaves were beginning to whisper among themselves, as if warning one another of the impending tempest. Something of the gloomy apprehension that overlay the village was in the minister's brown eyes as he held out his hand to Peter and watched him start off down the path. Suddenly he called to him, and the old man turned.

"You forgot to tell me the young man's name, Pete."

"His name?" echoed Peter, and added, with a grin which he endeavored to make playful: "Oh, you'll hear his name all right enough, when the time comes!"

CHAPTER IX

IN THE TOWER ROOM

AS Peter turned into the beach road, he caught sight of Rose Ruby, her head swathed in a fringed shawl, her skirts flapping above wrinkled shoe tops, standing before the window of her dilapidated shack and tying the blinds together with bits of dirty rag. He hurried forward, calling to her hoarsely, but she slunk quickly into the house and pulled the door to after her.

Cursing under his breath, he pounded up the path and raised his voice.

"Open that door, ye rattlin' bag of bones, or I'll kick it in!"

The answer came back plaintively:

"What fer? What d'you want?"

"I want to speak with ye, that's what. Open her up, and quick, too!"

She presented him with the sharp tip of her nose squeezed through the smallest possible aperture, but he could see her eyes gleaming in the semidarkness behind her.

"Well, then, what you got to say, callin' me names?"

"Ain't a patch on what I'll call ye if ye don't mind what I'm tellin', ye witch! I want ye to come down to my house, see? Watch fer the parson—Mr. Beckwith—an' when ye see him go by, step quick an' come after, or I'll come an' get ye!"

"But I can't. It's goin' to storm."

"An' a storm's nothin' to what'll happen to ye if ye don't come, woman!" announced Peter thunderously. "You're goin' to come along and finish up the job ye started this mornin'. You're goin' to see my girl married to-night. Surely"—with elaborate sarcasm—"ye won't stop away from a weddin' fer a little thing like rain, will ye?"

"A weddin'!" she squealed, and now the whole of her yellow grin was in evidence. "She goin' to marry him—after all? A weddin', hey?"

He left her chattering and cackling there on the wind-blown doorstep, and hurried on. He was smiling grimly when he turned into his own yard. What better bridesmaid could he have found than the woman who had already fouled the bride's good name?

He found Dorcas hauling a great square of tarpaulin up from the cellar. She tossed it down to scold him spiritedly.

"Father! Where have you been? Now you hurry and fasten this over the *Dorcas*, or you'll break your back bailing her out after the storm."

"I'll do it, girl—I'll do it right off," he said quietly enough, and gathered up the stuff. "Where's our star boarder, Dorie?"

"Upstairs, packing, I think."

When the blinds were all fastened securely, and the captive launch protected from the storm, he followed her inside.

"Jest get supper a bit early to-night, girl," he commanded. "I don't recollect eatin' overmuch fer dinner, an' I'm pretty hungry."

He watched her moving about from a far corner

of the kitchen, where he had ensconced himself with a clumsy old Colt across his knees and a can of oil beside him on the floor. The barrel of the old weapon was already beginning to give forth a blue sheen under the vigorous application of the oil-soaked rag in his hand.

Moving about the tower room with the dumb, uncertain haste of one who responds to instinct rather than to coherent thought, Richard was making his preparations for leaving Standish. His wardrobe trunk stood wide; his clothes lay heaped upon the bed and trailed across the chairs.

For hours he had been painstakingly struggling with the task before him, but his long fingers had become unaccountably clumsy. They seemed detached, something quite apart from the rest of him, insensible to the sharp agony in his heart. More than once he had stopped to regard them with dull impatience, or to curse softly at their impotence.

Again and again he prodded himself to activity, only to find himself, after a few moments of futile exertion, hunched dismally in the little Queen Anne chair, or peering once more across the churning water. He could hear the girl's voice assuring him that it had been her fault as much as his. He could see her face again as it had looked in the gray dawn—pale, wide-eyed, a little puzzled, with her rumpled hair wisping about her temples, her lips half parted in a smile.

Ah, her splendid self-possession had not withstood the emotional siege of that night's experience! Had she guessed? Could Richard have taken her into his arms and kissed the puzzled wonder from her eyes and love into them?

The thought shook him back once more to realities. Again he set diligently to work, to the tune of a dreary chant within him. He was going away—away from Dorcas, the woman he loved!

His thoughts swerved again to the trunk that he should even now be packing. He was leaving. Would Dorcas think his abrupt departure odd? No—blithe child that she was, how should she suspect that he loved her?

It occurred to him that he might have found a palliative in speech. How sweet her sympathy would have been!

The thought gave birth to a sudden impulse, and he hurried to the desk. He would write to her. Surely there would be no harm in that! Surely, after their long weeks of companionship, he owed her some explanation of his sudden leave taking!

He knew it to be a pitifully weak defense, but he picked up his pen and began to write feverishly.

DORCAS, MY DARLING: For the first and last time I am going to call you this. I don't know why I should write to you, unless it is that I am too small and selfish to deny myself the solace of putting on paper the things I so long to say to you.

You took me into your home and gave me your friendship, which is the greatest treasure I have ever possessed. I have been happy here—happier, I believe, than any living man. Until last night I did not discover—blind fool that I was—that the source of my happiness was yourself; but last night I knew that I loved you—I who forfeited my right to love any woman as I love you, ten years ago, when I linked my destiny with an-

other, to whom I am still bound by my marriage vows, if by nothing more.

For these ten years I have kept faith with myself and with the woman I married. I shall still keep faith, for how else should I dare to cherish the memory of you? You have lightened my burden—a burden whose weight I pray God you may never know. I leave you with your image in my heart, and I must keep my heart clean, so that it will be a worthy shrine for that blessed memory.

Think of me sometimes, Dorcas—think of the blundering wretch who loved you, who would have died for you if the sacrifice would have availed you, and who perhaps atoned in part for his mistakes by leaving you. I love you! I love you! I love you! Farewell!

RICHARD.

His cheeks were fairly burning and his heart was pounding heavily when he scrawled his name at the foot of the closely written page. Shaken out of his innate reserve, perhaps for the first time in his life, he dared not trust himself to read what he had written, but folded and slipped it into an envelope, wrote her name across the face, and propped the letter against the inkstand.

He was fumbling once more in the half-packed trunk when her voice came up the stair well to him.

"Supper, Mr. Brown!"

He shook himself peremptorily. There was need for self-control now, for the casual cordiality of the summer boarder about to take polite leave of his host.

In the kitchen, the adjustable lamp slung above

the table was lighted and lowered to within a foot of the white cloth. All the homelike comfort of the big room seemed to have been drawn within that small, gay circle of light. It gleamed on the dishes and the shining silver, touched the old man's rugged features with a gentle glow, and brought a latent sheen of bronze into the girl's smooth head.

"Well," Richard said lightly, "it looks to me like one of these spectacular storms we read about."

"It's dirty weather, an' looks mighty like a sou'-easter," returned old Peter, diligently apportioning the omelet. "A sou'-easter's likely to last three or four days. My father always said a sou'-easter never quit—it jest wore itself out."

The girl, spooning little heaps of browned potatoes, did not raise her eyes, but she said pleasantly:

"Did you finish your packing all right? Dreadful job, isn't it?"

"No, I didn't," replied Richard. "I'm not very good at that sort of thing, I'm afraid—too clumsy."

"Why not let Dorcas help ye some?" Peter broke in eagerly. "Women are better when it comes to that sort of thing. Should have asked her before."

"Oh, no—that would be an imposition!"

"Imposition, your granny!" scoffed Peter genially. "Course she'll help—won't you, Dorie? After supper ye can go up and help Mr. Brown with his things, can't ye, girl? Why don't ye say something?"

Her throat and cheeks were crimson, and she did not raise her eyes when she spoke, but Peter's glowing gaze did not release her until she had promised.

Then the heavy silence that had overlain the noon meal settled down upon them once more. There

was a good deal of clatter from Peter's knife and fork, but at the end of twenty minutes, when the girl rose to clear the plates away for the peaches and cake that were to follow the golden omelet, she looked disapprovingly at her father's plate.

"I thought you said you were hungry, daddy!" she said. "But none of us seem to have eaten much supper," she added with a nervous laugh.

"A storm," drawled Peter, with a sharp glance at his brooding guest, "most generally *does* take my appetite away. Don't it affect you that way, Mr. Brown?"

"Eh? Oh, yes," agreed Richard absently. "I shouldn't wonder."

"Now, Dorie," urged the old man, when they rose, and the girl began to gather up the dishes, "don't go botherin' about them things. Light Mr. Brown's lamp there, an' run upstairs an' give him a hand with his packin'."

She moved obediently across to the lamp shelf. Richard found himself wondering at the old man's repeated and unusual use of his pseudonym; yet, even as he wondered, his irritation was swept away on a wave of guilty ecstasy. Dorcas was coming up to the tower room, and they would be alone together for a few exquisite moments. She would be near him, her fingers would touch his things, he might even—if he could bring it about casually enough—touch her hand. Further treasures, these, for his album of memory!

He took the lamp from her and followed her up the stairs, heedless of the lusty reverberation throughout the wide halls, deaf to the melancholy ululations in the chimneys. When he set the lamp down on

the bureau, she regarded the cluttered room with genuine housewifely dismay.

"I'm sorry you're leaving us, Mr. Brown," she said softly, as she set to work.

"Oh, don't!" His cry was involuntary. "Don't call me that, Dorcas! Don't you remember last night? You called me—Richard!"

"That's right, girl! Last night you called him Richard, which I expect is his front name, all right; but the rest of it ain't Brown!"

It was Peter's characteristic drawl, and the unexpected sound of it brought them whirling about in startled surprise.

The old man's tall, angular figure filled the doorway. His little, buried, blue eyes caught the thin stream of light from the lamp, and their malicious gleam matched the blue sheen of the revolver barrel dangling from his fingers.

The girl was the first to shake off the spell he had lain upon them, and to seek refuge in commonplace words.

"Now, daddy, what are you doing, trotting that evil-looking old gun around the house and—and saying such funny things?"

Peter did not move, but a slow, malignant grin stretched his mouth, and he raised the Colt gradually until its muzzle covered Richard's heart.

"Saying funny things, am I?" he repeated sibilantly. "Ask *him* if it's funny! Ask him!"

The girl turned her puzzled gaze to Richard, and found that his eyes had gone lifeless and his face paper white. He essayed a feeble smile.

"No," he said, "it isn't funny. Once I found some humor in the situation, but now—no, it isn't funny."

"Ye see!" gloated Peter. "Ye see, *he* don't think it's funny!"

The gaze of the two men held across the girl—a gaze fraught with some galvanic force beyond her comprehension. She took a step toward her father.

"Why, daddy——"

"Stay off, girl, stay off!" he commanded, without taking his eyes from Richard's face. "I think *Mr. Brown* an' me sort of understand each other!"

"Daddy dear, what is it?" Anxiety for him had swept away all other emotions. She whirled on Richard. "Something has happened! Can't you see? Father's not well, he——"

"She thinks I've gone crazy, don't she now, *Mr. Brown?*" broke in Peter suavely. "But we know different, don't we? Ye know I ain't mad, don't ye—not mad the way she thinks?"

"Yes," said Richard dully, for the ingenuous simplicity of the girl was not his. He knew now that guilt had lain heavily upon him—guilt born of that bleak moment on the rocks the night before—the guilt of one who has sinned in desire, if not in deed. Somehow the tale of their artless escapade had reached the old man, and he believed—what he believed was only too evident from the savage glare of his little eyes and the poised pistol in his hand. "Yes, I know that you're not mad, Mr. Stayton, but you are mistaken in——"

"Mistaken!" boomed Peter, his self-restraint slipping. "Mistaken, ye say! That shows well enough that ye know why I've come up here an' brought this along!" He patted the barrel of the weapon significantly. "Oh, you're a slick one, all right! Goin' away, warn't ye? Thought to get off with a

whole skin to ye, eh? Didn't care what become of the girl ye'd ruined?"

"Father! Father!"

The girl sprang forward, but he whirled on her with a savage growl.

"Shut up, you! I'm doin' the talkin' now!"

His voice had risen until now its volume throbbed and reverberated in the little room, and became an integral part of the tumult all about them. Richard spoke for the girl, his voice sharply edged.

"Mr. Stayton, you must listen to me," he said. "There is nothing to reproach your daughter for. I can easily explain——"

"Listen to ye!" broke in the old man. "What stock do ye think I'd put in anything ye'd say? And who's reproaching the girl? Oh, you're a smooth liar, *Mr. Brown*, I'll grant ye that! All of ye is jest one lie, from your name clean through ye!" He loomed threateningly over them, but the hand that held the pistol was steady. "I took ye into my house on faith, like I'd 'a' picked ye up at sea an' give ye safe, free passage into harbor; an' what did ye do? Ye robbed me—ye took somethin' ye can't never give back!"

"No, father, he——"

"Shut up, girl! I'm at the wheel now!" She shrank away from him, from the terrible passion that was burning him—the passion that only calm men can know. "Do ye think she can ever hold her head up amongst decent folks any more? Do ye think I can? Did ye think ye could come up here an' dirty the name of Stayton, an' get off scot-free? You're the one that's mad, if ye think that!"

"By Heaven, you shall hear——"

But Richard's hoarse cry was cut short by the old man's savage roar.

"Say another word, an' I'll shoot ye where ye stand—hear? Think I want to listen to any more of your lies? Warn't ye smooth and sweet, an' then the minute my back was turned didn't ye—didn't ye rob me?"

It was as if Peter had begun to fear his own terrible passion. He backed slowly away toward the door, his eyes and pistol still focused on Richard, his chest heaving.

"God fergive the murder in my heart—but I ain't goin' to kill ye. That would let ye off too easy. I'm goin' to make ye a present, instead. I'm goin' to give ye the girl ye wronged!"

CHAPTER X

BIGAMY

AT the old man's last words, the drawn dismay on Richard's face had given place to a dazed disbelief. For a moment he stood staring woodenly before him. The girl's eyes were fixed in wide horror upon her father. Then Richard leaped forward.

"My God, man, you can't do that! You——"

"No? Can't I?" Peter's former rage was a puerile thing compared to the maniacal frenzy with which he met the other man's horrified cry. "No? Can't I? It's as good as done. Don't ferget I told ye I'd jest as soon shoot ye as not; so stand back, young feller, and keep your mouth shut! Do ye think I been idle all day a mournin' my loss? Not I! The parson's downstairs this minute, likely, a-brushin' up his service. Didn't I know that would be the last thing ye'd want? A slick, rich city feller like you to marry my girl!"

"For God's sake, Mr. Stayton——"

But Peter lunged at him.

"One more word an' I'll put a hole through your carcass! I'll kill the girl, too. A Stayton—ye may not believe it, but a Stayton would prefer death to disgrace any time. Oh, I know what ye'd say, an' I know the girl would take your part. That's a woman's way—that's the Stayton way. Ye've both

had plenty of time to talk—now *I'll* do the talkin'. The parson's waitin', see?"

"Father! Father!"

The girl had half risen, her voice strengthened by desperation, but Peter broke off her cry.

"Unless ye want to meet your Maker with a stain on your soul, girl, ye'll keep quiet! Ye'll both keep quiet now"—he chuckled triumphantly—"quiet as little lambs, an' take your medicine. If ye don't, if either of ye speak one word that's like to make the parson think it ain't all regular and proper, I'll kill ye both, so help me God!"

Once more silence held them—a crowded, clamorous silence, as if the forces of nature had been coerced into providing a fitting background for the rudimentary drama being staged in the quivering tower atop the old white house.

"And now," suggested the old man with grim humor, "s'pose ye jest hand out them papers an' things ye said ye had along! I got a prejudice to the name of Brown, somehow. My girl'll be satisfied with the name ye was christened by."

The girl sprang quickly to her feet, her gaze clinging to the blue barrel of the Colt as it followed her across the room to Richard's side.

"That's right! Get beside him!" sneered Peter.

His words released her from the spell in which the weapon had held her. She raised her eyes to Richard's face, and slowly he brought his haggard gaze to meet hers. It was a valiant little face she lifted to him, drained of its color, its buoyant vivacity, its endearing sparkle, but calm in the security of her own innocence.

"Your name isn't Brown, Richard?"

All her concern seemed to have centered itself in this disclosure.

"No," he said gently.

"What is it?"

"My name is Richard Sells, Dorcas."

She shrank against him when Peter's free hand reached past them to the table, on which were strewn some loose papers, with a check book among them. The old man's fingers fumbled swiftly in the heap. Then, with a triumphant grunt, he backed again to the door and raised his voice, his eyes and the pistol still on that silent pair.

Richard was aware that Peter had called the clergyman, but this seemed, for the moment, of less importance than the fact that the girl had believed him before her father had verified his name. He found a curious triumph in this—found, too, that his incoherent thoughts had met and grappled with the grotesque situation with a sort of detached and forensic logic.

He saw that he was helpless to prevent the marriage. He knew that if he blurted out the truth now, as he had been trying to do, the old man in his wrath was likely to shoot them both, and to go to his grave with a sense of duty well performed. Of their harmless excursion the night before, he evidently believed the worst. If the man whom Peter thought guilty of betraying his daughter were to confess that he was not free, the disclosure would only color the supposed offense more darkly. It would probably snuff out the last ember of the father's waning reason.

"Remember!" hissed Peter from the doorway.

He stood aside then, and Richard was conscious of the stocky figure of the little minister, and,

close at the latter's heels, the withered and gangling Rose Ruby. It was as if he were an attentive spectator at some preposterous play, toward which he had resolved to be politely uncritical. He was aware of voices. The clergyman's was warm and deep—an incongruously big voice for such a small man, Richard decided dispassionately.

"An' this is the groom, parson," Peter was saying with an elaborate assumption of heartiness. "Mr. Richard Sells, of New York—Parson Beckwith."

Richard felt his hand taken into a small, plump grasp, knew—surprisingly—that he was making a fitting rejoinder to the introduction, even while a vagrant sense of humor took cognizance of Rose Ruby's festive frock. It was green, with the snug bodice and puffed sleeves of the late '90s. Its revealing outlines made her look like some overgrown insect—a gigantic grasshopper, that was it!

A pressure upon his arm shook him oddly. The girl was looking up into his face, and an elusive word was floating just outside his consciousness. Ring! Some one had mentioned a ring. They were demanding a ring of him, but Peter already had it. It lay on the old man's outspread palm—a wide gold band.

"It was her mother's," he announced quietly. "She took it off the night she died—first time it had been off since we got married. She said, almost with her last breath, that she wanted Dorcas, here, to have it when *she* got married. Here it is!"

A trickle of water had skulked in beneath the window frame, and had started to crawl down the wall and across the matting. Then, as if the rich portent of the words had the power to still even the

orgiastic rites outside, a lull fell over the tower room, and the minister's voice rose clear and full.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this company——"

It was the marriage ceremony. These were the words that made Richard, in addition to everything else, a bigamist!

The clergyman's words droned on, calm and imperturbable. His voice was lifted in a question now, and Richard was aware that the old man had slipped his hand suggestively into his pocket. He heard his own voice saying:

"I will!"

He knew a swift sense of relief when the minister shifted his earnest scrutiny to the girl. After all, he told himself, there was less harm in an empty ceremony than in murder. He had not hurt the girl. To-morrow the old man would be sane, and would listen to their tale calmly. After that, Richard would be gone from Standish. All this was but a melodramatic bit of play acting staged by an infuriated old bigot. It was utterly unreal.

But the hand that was placed in his was real! A cold, moist little hand it was, but there was a steadiness in it that was magically reassuring.

He brought his dazed eyes to focus on the girl's face, and the sight of its swept his brain clear of its befuddling fever. This was his gift to her. How willingly he would have submitted himself to Peter's alternative, how gladly have welcomed the precious oblivion of death! But the girl's life should not be forfeit.

He echoed the minister's words evenly, secure in the rightness of his purpose, gathering strength from

the thought that his crime was for her sake—for the woman he loved.

Her voice was raised now, making the immemorial vow—"for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and obey."

How brave she was! With what palpitant life she endowed the words! She knew nothing of love, nothing of life, but her inherent valor would one day meet both as superby as she was meeting this crisis. As her clear voice rose and fell in the little room, it occurred to Richard that she could have spoken the phrases no more devoutly had they been uttered in all sincerity; yet she was only playing the preposterous rôle her father had thrust upon her.

"Well, well, Dorcas, my dear!" the minister was saying genially. "I'm not too old to claim a parson's privilege and kiss the bride, am I?"

"Ye'll find your way out if I don't come down with ye—eh, parson?" interrupted Peter loudly. "Sorry there ain't no weddin' feast with this weddin', but there warn't no time fer frills an' furbelows, with these young people in such a hurry."

Rose Ruby had sidled surreptitiously over to Dorcas, her face thrust forward eagerly; and now her hoarse whisper filled the room.

"Well, since he has married ye," she advised sibilantly, "make him take ye to Coney Island on your weddin' trip. It's a grand——"

But Peter's voice boomed forth, clipping short the eloquent description that might have followed.

"Come along, Rose Ruby! The parson's leavin'!"

She skulked swiftly to the door, her eyes avoiding the murderous malignity of Peter's regard, her head still wagging knowingly at the girl.

The clergyman bustled out, to the tune of his own

studiously preserved cheerfulness. They heard his voice raised in lively conversation with the cackling old woman as they descended the stairs.

Peter stood motionless at the door until the sounds grew faint. Then he closed it softly, and turned a savage, triumphant face to his daughter.

CHAPTER XI

"WHOM GOD HAS JOINED!"

DORCAS was standing rigidly beside the old chest of drawers, the fingers of her left hand curled against the palm, her eyes fixed with breathless intensity upon the wedding band.

"Well, Dorcas!"

She raised her head slowly at the words. Richard shook himself out of his enveloping lethargy, and took a step forward, but she drew him back with a firm pressure on his arm. The old man smiled contemptuously at the swift pantomime.

"Or perhaps I should say—Mrs. Sells," he said.

Still she did not speak, though for a moment color flamed in her face—flamed, and faded almost at once. The pressure on his arm still admonished Richard to silence.

"I pretended I had to stop up here long enough to give ye my blessin'!" hissed Peter. "Blessin'!"

He took a step toward them, eliminating Richard from his vision by the simple expedient of turning a hunched shoulder to him.

"What I stopped up here to say to ye was this, girl—he's set ye right with the world now. You're married to him in the eyes of God and man, but that don't mean he's fit to have ye. What he done to ye proved that!"

Once more Richard took a step forward and

opened his lips to speak, but the bitter words were flooding from the old man's twisted mouth.

"I'm a Christian man, and the Lord's word is law with me; but even the Lord wouldn't ask a woman to live with a man she despised, an' if ye don't despise him after what he done to ye, ye're no kin of mine! He's saved your good name—that's all *we* care about. Now show him the door! Fling him overboard like ye would bilge water, girl!"

The same elemental forces that were at work outside were shaking the old man's big frame and thickening his voice; but the girl did not wince. She gazed back at him, her chin lifted and thrust slightly forward. When he paused, she lifted her hands, with the palms outward, as if to warn him away from her. It was a gesture of ineffable contempt.

"You—you dare?" she breathed. "You who married us at the point of that evil gun—you dare to tell me to throw *him* out?"

The old man stepped back, as if her repulsion had been physically enforced. A surprise that was almost ludicrous swept over his face.

"Dare?" he thundered. "Dare, when ye know he wronged ye?"

"Yes, *dare!*" she echoed. "Wronged me? How dared you think it? How dared you judge us on the evidence of a half crazy old woman? What right had you to condemn me unheard?"

"I saw it with my own eyes!" the old man was saying doggedly, his fury fanned by this sudden insurrection. "I saw the skiff up to the sluice? Ye don't deny ye came in on the tide? Ye don't deny ye were out till dawn, or nigh onto dawn, with him?"

"No, I don't deny it. I wouldn't have denied it if you had asked me, as any just father would have

done; but you didn't ask me. You preferred to listen to the evil tongue of a wicked old woman. That was all you needed to sentence me—you who call yourself a Christian!"

"Ye *were* out all night!"

"And I might have been out all night again and again, and still never have been the thing you thought me! Had you no faith in your own daughter?"

"Yes!" he bellowed. "But I ain't got no faith in smooth city liars! I don't know him!"

"You knew *me*! Do you think I am so lacking in pride, so weak, that I would forfeit my self-respect easily as that?" She stepped back, holding her arms out before her, as if to place a tangible barricade between them.

"Ye sullied my name," he roared. "Ye've ruined me."

"You see, you were thinking of yourself—not of me. If you had thought of me, you would surely have given me a chance to explain."

"I was thinkin' of ye!"

"No, you were thinking only of yourself. Do you think my mother would have believed an evil thing like that of me? Do you?"

"Thank God, she ain't here to see it!" cried Peter. He raised his fist and shook it above his head. "She'd 'a' died of shame fer ye! Ye were out all night with this—this——"

"We were!" she broke in. "We went out on the rocks, to watch the moon rise, and it was so—so beautiful"—her voice broke, but she kept on bravely—it was so beautiful that we just stayed on and talked, and forgot that there were foul minds and cruel suspicions in the world. It seemed as if there were only peace and beauty and purity. Then we saw

that the tide had gone out, and our boat was beached. It took us a long time to get her off, and when we came back we had to row into the sluice." Her voice died away, and her shoulders lifted in a contemptuous shrug. "There is the horrible story. You might have had it before, if you had taken the trouble to ask for it. You knew that I wouldn't lie to you!"

The flickering light from the small lamp and the screaming of the wind outside lent vitality to the silence that followed. The old man's fingers were clawing at his mustache, and his eyes were fixed on the girl's white face with a venom that had gathered greater virulence as her story progressed.

"Did you hear me promise to love, honor, and obey him? And after *that* do you think I would send him away—my husband?"

She had stepped closer to Richard. He could feel her quivering against him. He knew that her eyes had left her father's face and were raised for a fleeting instant to him.

"Where my husband goes, I go. I am his wife, and whom God has joined together let no man put asunder!"

CHAPTER XII

DARKENED SKIES

THE words hung resonantly in the little room, and were taken up by the polyphony outside, of which they became the theme, until the whole was woven into a mighty fugue. The girl's exalted face held the gaze of the two men, and the confession on Richard's lips withered into a jumble of futile words.

The old man, startled for an instant out of his choleric fury, started back, and for the first time a chilly trickle of doubt cut its way through his assurance. The girl's radiance clothed her like an immaculate vestment. Could a wanton look like that?

But even as his misgivings invaded his fevered brain, his fury redoubled to meet them.

"So that's the way ye feel about it, is it?" he sneered. "Well, mebbe ye think ye can pull the wool over my eyes, but it's too late. Ye got some pride left in ye, anyway!"

Once more Richard came forward, but the girl pressed him back.

"Don't speak, Richard—don't speak!"

"No fear of him speakin' now! He's got his dose! If ye take my advice, ye'll heave him overboard an' give the sharks a bellyful!"

"You dare!" she cried. "You dare! Go! Do you hear me? *Go!*"

Involuntarily the old man shrank back under the violence of the command. He felt awkwardly for the knob, and flung the door wide. His face was a

quivering, distorted mask of fury, but there was a ghastly suspicion in his hot eyes that belied the sneer on his lips.

"Oh, I'll go, an' leave ye to wallow in your sin! Since ye made your wicked bed, lie on it!"

He pounded down the stairs and through the dim halls. The kitchen door stood open, pouring a feeble stream of light on the figured strip of carpet that led to the front door. He stepped into the kitchen, slamming the door behind him. Then for a wild, befuddled moment he stood staring across the room.

Bunched in a low rocker near the stove, the folds of her musty, green gown pouring over the floor and imbuing her face and gleaming eyes with a sickly hue, sat Rose Ruby. The bridge of her crooked nose was twitching, like that of a senile rabbit, above her yellow grin.

With a whispered curse, Peter strode across to her. Her smile widened as he approached.

"Do ye know I could kill ye?" he hissed. "Do ye know I *will* kill ye, if ye don't tell me the truth? Ye *did* see 'em, didn't ye? Ye did see 'em come in together, nigh onto dawn, didn't ye?"

Her cracked yellow grin did not alter, and she wagged her ragged head with a vehemence that threatened to sever it from her scrawny neck.

He released her, conviction flooding back reassuringly. Muttering unintelligibly, he stalked the length of the kitchen, and then came to a pause before the old woman.

"Go to bed! Ye can stop here to-night. I'll be needin' ye to-morrow. Get to bed!" he commanded.

He watched her as, with a final triumphant grin, she sidled out of the room.

Once alone, he abandoned himself utterly to the

madness that was creeping upon him. Like some vicious, caged monster he paced the room, back and forth, back and forth. He had been right—they *had* been out all night. Well, he had married them; and now she was up there—his girl and her seducer.

When the door closed on the old man, Richard stood gazing blindly at it, while the massed misery of a decade crowded in upon him. A benumbing paralysis, born of his own futility, was upon him as he turned to the girl—to the tribunal of those clear, confident eyes.

She faced him with her head high, and with color flaming in her cheeks. Humbly he took her two outstretched hands. They stood thus for a moment, looking into each other's eyes, while the world fell away from them, leaving them on the altar stairs of some shining Arcadia. Her voice reached him, soft, ineffably tender:

"Richard! You see it's all right! In spite of everything, it *is* all right!"

She said it with exultant assurance. It was all right, in spite of everything!

Mechanically his brain recorded the words, "in spite of everything"; but she had yet to learn about Della.

"Didn't you feel it, too, Richard, when the minister began to speak? Before that it was horrible; and then suddenly—it was when you took my hand—I knew that it was all right, for I looked up at you and I *saw*!"

"You saw?" he echoed dully.

"That you—that you loved me," she faltered. "I could read it in your eyes; and when I saw it there, I knew that I loved you!"

He felt her swaying against him, and knew that he had taken her into his arms, that he was holding her close, that her head was on his breast and his lips against her hair. She loved him—she had said it; and he found himself echoing her.

“Dorcas, Dorcas, I love you, I love you!”

“I knew, Richard, I knew!”

Ecstasy flooded back, washing prudence and reason before it.

“And you love *me*?”

“I do—I love you. That is why I said that, in spite of all this horror, it is all right. We were meant to belong to each other—and what does it matter how it came about?”

“*We were meant to belong to each other!*” The words roused him from the ecstatic trance into which he had slipped. His arms fell away from her in an agony of self-condemnation. What had he done? What had he said? He had told her that he loved her when he had intended to tell her about Della. Why?

Ah, he remembered now—she had said she loved him! How could he cap that divine statement with his own sordid story? Yet he must tell her. Her love for him made it all the more imperative. She believed herself to be his wife!

“Dorcas, Dorcas, what have I done—when I would rather have died than make you unhappy?”

She caught his hands and cuddled them against her breast.

“But we’re going to be happy together, Richard!”

“You don’t know——”

“I know that we love each other. I know that love can survive even this.”

"But I have subjected you to all this—to a barbarous marriage that never should have been——"

"No, no!" she protested. "It was I—my father; but, even so, perhaps it was meant to be this way. We might never have found each other. After all"—she raised a troubled smile to him—"you were going away from me, Richard!"

Her eyes went to the trunk, roamed aimlessly about the cluttered room, and came at last to his desk, with its jumble of books and papers, and, propped against the inkstand, the white envelope with the scrawl across its face.

It held her gaze and lured her across to it. It seemed as if she knew that it bore her name even before she groped for it with fingers that had gone suddenly dead. She fumbled desperately with the sealed flap before it would yield the closely written pages.

Once, as she stood there reading what he had written, Richard raised his head and stared haggardly across at her; but, save for the unearthly pallor of her skin, the girl gave no sign of the havoc those tragic words were making of her valorous composure.

He was dragged back from the abysmal despair into which he had sunk by her touch upon his hair. He jerked his head up wildly. Only her eyes were alive in the still marble of her face, but they were living wells of commingled horror and compassion. He sprang to his feet and away from her, plunging against the trunk.

"You see! You see! Oh, my Heaven, Dorcas, don't hate me!"

"Hate you?" she whispered incredulously. "Hate

you, dear? It is you who should hate my father. Oh, Richard, my *dear!*"

With a little cry of protest, she went to him, all the newly awakened forces of her womanhood rising to meet the sudden demand upon them. She took his hands. At her touch he crumbled utterly, and dropped to his knees before her.

"Ah, Dorcas, my darling, my darling, forgive me! I never meant to hurt you, God knows!"

"Of course not!"

She had his head in her arms, had drawn it against her, and he could feel her fingers against his temples and the warm throb of her body against his cheek.

"And now you know—you know!"

"Yes," she said, "I know. I might have known before, but somehow I never thought of—just that. After all, dear," she continued, after a long moment, "your telling me this, and my knowing it, doesn't alter the fact that we love each other."

"Ah, my darling, I would be better dead!"

"No!" she protested, and her voice had taken on a challenging ring. "No, I don't believe that. I don't believe things like this happen because we will them. Father thinks he brought this about, but I don't believe that, either. I believe there is something behind this that none of us can see—the same power that put love into my heart. Perhaps it is that you need me—that you need me even more than if we could belong to each other."

A sharp crash cut into the solemn words as one of the small windowpanes broke loose from its frame and came crashing to the floor. The wind rushed through the blinds, loosing a small tornado among the papers on the desk.

Richard leaped to his feet, but the girl was at the window before him. She stood with her back against the shattered pane, stopping the rush of wind and rain with her slender body, like a living fortification between him and the frustrated fury of the elements. For a moment she remained there before she moved away and began stuffing his raincoat into the ragged hole.

When she turned to him again, her face was radiant with a sort of divine elation. It was as if they had both sensed the symbolism in that impulsive maternal gesture. His knees were shaking. She laid a firm hand on his arm, and drew him gently toward the couch.

"Come, dear!"

He made a feeble protest, knowing as he made it how puerile and ineffectual he had become beneath the soothing magic of her compassion and understanding. With gently urgent eyes and hands she softly forced his head down upon the pillow. He captured her hands and drew them against his face.

"Dorcas, Dorcas, what can I say?"

"Nothing—unless you tell me that you love me."

"I love you, I love you! I am a monster, and you are a saint! I love you dearly, but what can I do? What are we going to do?"

"I don't know yet, dear. Try not to think about the future."

"I am a bigamist!"

"You are mine!" she cried. "I know I shouldn't feel that way if it were wrong. We know in our hearts that in the sight of God we are man and wife. Even if we can never belong to each other on earth, my love is yours forever. You need it—you

need me. We need each other. I am going to take care of you."

She had dropped down beside him, her head close to his. Outside, the tumultuous wind had spent itself and was dying into a low moan. The blissful quiescence that had succeeded Richard's despair took possession of him again.

There was magic in the lax fingers he was holding against his face—a strange legerdemain that blotted out the past, obscured the future, and left him suspended somewhere between, in the impregnable fortress of the girl's tenderness. His fingers tightened around hers, and the girl, meeting the almost-frantic appeal in his eyes, gave him her calm, serene smile.

Like some helpless victim of the storm, he had been tossed at her feet, buffeted and bruised and torn by life, and she had loved him. Surely there was some agency in this that was not mortal! Surely he had not been sent to her that she might fling him back into the bleak depths from which he had come!

The thought lent her strength, lit a faint beacon of hope in her brooding eyes, and banished the dark shadow that lay just beyond the dawn and over the dark, inscrutable future. To-night she must cherish him, must forget everything save that he was prostrated, and that she must have courage for them both.

"We must try to have faith, Richard," she whispered.

He moved her hands to his lips and kissed them reverently.

"My wedding ring, dear!" she reminded him softly.

He laid his lips reverently on the wide gold band.

CHAPTER XIII

HAND OF FATE

ABOUT the time when New England was hauling forth her protective tarpaulins and fastening her blinds against the oncoming storm, some three thousand miles away, a low-slung, blue roadster purred lazily along the road that falls away from Quimper to the sand dunes of the Breton coast. Past ancient plaster houses, chipped and scarred by the years, it rolled, drawing the curious glances of peasants at work in the fields, rousing sleeping dogs, who barked their protest against anything as modern as a motor invading their quiet seclusion.

The woman in the car turned, with a smile, to her companion. She snapped open a thin silver case and extracted a cigarette.

"Stop a minute and let me get a light, will you?"

Obediently he drew over to the side of the road and stopped the car near a cluster of poplar trees. He held a match to her cigarette and watched the lazy cloud of smoke issue from her red lips.

"I suppose it's your husband," he ruminated sourly, after a moment.

"You suppose what's my husband?"

"Whatever it is that keeps you——"

"Impregnable?" she supplied archly.

"Hm—yes."

"My dear Hal, how delightfully naïve! I'm as

much out of Dicky's reach as yours. You mustn't attribute my fidelity to such a worthy motive."

"Then, by Heaven——"

"Now, Hal, don't get heroic! It's too wearing."

"You've kept me dangling for a long time, Della."

She shrugged.

"I don't know—— See that sunset!"

She pointed ahead where the road traced a sinuous course between placid fields toward the distant sand dunes along the shore. Above it the sun hung hazily, pouring an iridescent flood of color on the undulating hills and tiny plaster houses.

"You see," she observed lazily, "how pleasant and inarduous a thing it is to look at a sunset; and yet all that beauty has been the cause of countless scientists' wrinkles, because they insisted upon prodding and prying to see what makes it beautiful. In other words, they weren't willing to dangle, so they got themselves all messed up in refractions and parallaxes and things."

"I don't give a damn for the sun! It's you that I——"

"But don't you see the analogy? You're not satisfied just to have me like this. You want to stir me up and dissect me, and I refuse to be either stirred up or dissected!"

"You can refuse all you like. You can't get away from me now!"

"What will you use—force?"

"No—tenderness."

"How bourgeois!"

"You've never been in love!"

"I told you I refuse to be stirred up."

He took her roughly by the shoulders, his heavy, handsome face crimson.

"It isn't going to do you a bit of good to refuse. Now that I know your scruples are mere vanity, I'm damned if I observe your danger signals any longer!"

"Then don't cry if you get hurt."

"Della, you're a fool," the man said. "You're a fascinating, pig-headed little fool, and you're drying up like an undernourished spring!" An impatient frown drew itself between her languid eyes, but he hurried recklessly on. "Here we are, alone together, three thousand miles away from everybody, and what do you give me? Words! You think you're not inhibited, but you are. You're a vain little prig, and all these carefully smothered emotions of yours are going to turn and rend you some day, while love——"

"Who's talking about love."

"I am! I love you, and you know it!"

"I know you entertain a mild, emotional sentiment for me."

"My Heaven, you call it mild! I've been aching, burning for you this long time." She could feel his hot breath against her cheek. "Do you think I'm going to continue to dangle, as you call it, when I've got you here in my arms, when I know that underneath that metallic shell of yours you're warm—*warm*? Don't you know that just over the hill there lies ecstasy for us both?"

"No, Hal."

"You will!" he said hoarsely. "You can't resist it, Della. What are you made of, anyway?"

"Sugar and spice and everything nice," she chanted, but her breath was coming in short gasps.

"I believe it!" he gloated. "I don't believe there's a molecule of warm, red blood in your veins! If there is, you'll come with me!"

His sardonic smile had fixed itself on her lips, but his eyes were blazing.

"Look!" he cried. "Look down there, where the road turns to the sea! There's an inn hanging over the dunes over there. From its windows you can see an eternity of blue water—blue in the morning, with the sun on it, and at night sprinkled with magic by the moon. Think of us there, little prude! Let me teach you what it means to love and be loved!"

"Ah, you're not playing fair with me!" she whispered. "You're poetizing!"

"I'm talking the language of love," he said ardently. "Look, the sun is pointing the way! Come, Della, where we shall be alone!"

"And then?" she breathed.

"And then," he echoed, irritated at being shot so far beyond his target, "then more life, more love! We shall have had our hour!"

There was no breeze, and the heat of the late August afternoon was sultry and close. The body of the little roadster seemed to have captured and held the warm rays of the sun, wrapping its occupants in an enervating cloak. Della's eyes were hot now, and the rouge on her cheeks faded against the flush beneath it. He bent over her, laid his lips swiftly on hers, withdrew them as swiftly, and threw out his clutch.

"Where are we going?" she demanded.

"Ah!" he gloated. "A pretty pronoun, my darling! I've just told you where we are going—there!" He pointed ahead. "To the end of the world—together, little prude!"

"You know that isn't true!"

"I must have proof, then!"

"You shall have it!"

He thrust out his chin and leaned forward, as if invoking the power of the little car to follow his own leaping spirits. Her lips still burning from his kiss, she leaned back inertly against the seat.

"But step on it, Hal!" she admonished softly. "My barriers are down, but you must hurry before I change my mind and put them up again!"

They shot ahead down the precariously winding road, past tranquil fields and sleeping cottages, past placid herds of sheep and families of astounded goats, who loped frantically for shelter from that meteoric apparition. The rushing air had a tang of salt in it, and the sinking sun was ahead of them.

"If I could just keep that glare out of my eyes, damn it!" he cursed.

Only a moment later, a Breton fisherman, dragging his nets up the beach after his day's haul, jerked abruptly upright, and, with a muttered invocation of his favorite saint, crossed himself, as a wild, blue monster came hurtling over the steep dunes a few hundred feet above him—came crashing down close to the placidly lapping waves, where it settled into a tangled heap of blue and gleaming nickel, half buried in the sand.

The fisherman's cry summoned others, who came running toward the ominously quiescent pile, crossing themselves as they ran, and babbling incoherently. They huddled together not too near the jumbled mass, their white lips moving in soundless apostrophes to their saints. One man among them, braver than the rest, stepped closer, to inspect the gruesome object. He came back quickly, his face gray, his cap dangling from limp fingers.

"Henri has gone for the doctor," announced some one.

The man who had looked closely at the quivering blue thing shook his head.

"Even the priest would be too late to help them. Some one had better go to the *maire*."

A few of them hurried off in search of help, while others grouped themselves against the sand dunes, to listen in morbid absorption to the fisherman who had witnessed the accident.

"It came over so—*mon Dieu*, as if it were falling out of the heavens themselves! I was hauling in my nets when I heard it—a great roar——"

As he talked, the sun, like a sleepy, bloodshot eye, disappeared beneath the lid of the horizon, and the rising tide crawled avidly up, to pull and suck at the inert mass lying on the sand.

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGE BREAKFAST

IN spite of Peter Stayton's dark prophecies, dawn rode up the east with a brilliant outburst of color that laid a sheen of rouge over the storm-ravaged face of the country and filtered sportively through shuttered windows. Its glow on her eyelids awoke Dorcas, and she lifted her head stiffly.

There was no bewilderment in her eyes as they came to rest on Richard's face. She seemed, even in her fitful sleep, to have held him close in her consciousness, and morning brought with it an unblurred memory of all that had occurred—a clear sense of the tragic problem she faced.

Richard still slept, cuddling her hand against his cheek, and in his complete relaxation his face had taken on the wistful pathos of a weary child. As she looked at him, she was aware of a resurgent rush of that protective tenderness born last night of his helpless despair. It swept her own fears into the background, and left her more fiercely determined than ever to rise to his need.

It was when she gently drew her hand away that he awoke. He stared blankly at her for an instant, before realization flooded back to line and darken his face.

"Dorcas! Dorcas!"

"Yes, Richard, I'm here, and everything is all

right. Everything is going to be all right." It was a defiant chant. "See, the sun is shining!"

He sat up, reaching for her hand again, as if for a tangible prop.

"I have been asleep. How could I sleep?"

"I have slept, too," she told him, sensing the self-reproach in his voice.

His eyes dropped to the wedding ring on her finger and clung there in terror.

"What are we going to do? What can I do?"

"Nothing, yet. We must think."

"Think!" he echoed. "I daren't. I must get away from here. I should have gone last night!"

"No," she said firmly. "I couldn't have let you go then. I can't let you go now—like this."

"But the risk! They think we are married—your father, everybody. I have committed bigamy!"

She shook her head slowly, calming him with cool, steady eyes.

"You have voluntarily committed no sin," she reminded him. "*That* burden is father's!" she added, with a swift, terrible vehemence.

She crossed the room. One by one, she threw the blinds wide, and then opened the little door that gave upon the balcony, flushing the room with light. After a moment he followed her to the door, and stood beside her, looking across the swampy meadows to the blue reaches of water beyond.

In the impassive immutability of nature there was a vague reassurance for them. How completely the sea and sky had recovered their serenity! The fierce tempest of the night before had left no more trace upon that bland tranquillity than had their own emotional upheaval. How trivial all human problems seem in comparison with the powers of nature! How

unchanged the sea and the sky will be a hundred years from now!

Something of the same thought moved the girl to say musingly:

"It might be yesterday or the day before—or any day, mightn't it? Nothing is changed—out there!"

While Richard had only a bitter smile for that, she seemed to derive a fresh fund of hope from the thought.

"They know, all those strange forces out there, how things are with us."

"But," he said gently, "we are not dealing with all those strange forces, as you call them, dear. We are dealing with human minds—with all the little laws of men. According to these laws I have made you an outcast!"

"No!" she denied hotly. "No—there must be a way out for us. There must be!"

He smiled wanly at the naïve cry. His racing thoughts flew to Della, came back to old Peter, and to the village—which, by this time, must know of the hasty wedding in the tower—and to the girl herself, whose reputation would hang in shreds once the scandalmongers had found it a legitimate target for their relentless shots. He felt himself slipping once more into a panic of terror.

"I must get away," he said. "I must get away for your sake, Dorcas."

"No!" she broke in hotly. "I can't let them talk against you, Richard, and not tell them the truth."

"But you can't tell them that, either."

His words lost themselves in unfathomable conjecture as he stared bleakly down into her eyes. It was not until a soft rapping on the door had been repeated for a third time that the sound penetrated

their desolate absorption. It brought them back to face those grim realities whose unknown emissary had already arrived—the girl magnificently on the defensive, the man with the clenched teeth of desperation.

Dorcas went swiftly to the door and flung it wide. With the sickly green folds of the outdated dress still falling about her meager limbs, Rose Ruby stood on the threshold. She leered in at them with a sort of friendly camaraderie, her chin thrust forward, her bright, beady eyes flashing over the room with unconcealed relish.

"I thought," she purred with an ingratiating yellow grin, "ye'd mebbe like to have me bring yore breakfast up here!"

"Oh, then you stayed, Rose Ruby?" said the girl coldly.

"Yes, I stayed. Yore pa said he might be needin' me."

"Did father send you up here?"

The old woman shook her head, and her grin broadened. With her head cocked on one side, like a worldly-wise cockatoo, she managed a most elaborate wink.

"He's out lobsterin'; but I know brides. Warn't I one myself? An' I'd jest as lief bring it up—yore breakfast, I mean."

"No, no, thanks!" The girl's face was a painful scarlet, and she spoke to Richard over her shoulder, avoiding his eyes. "Will you come down when you're ready, Richard? I'll go ahead and attend to things."

The old woman fell back as Dorcas swept out, closing the door behind her. In the dim light of the stair well, her flaming eyes rested for an instant on that grinning old face.

"Go down! Don't come up here again—do you hear? Go down!"

Muttering plaintive excuses, Rose Ruby fumbled her way downstairs, but the fire of the girl's burning cheeks had filled her greedy soul with a warm glow. She was still nodding and cackling inaudibly when she entered the kitchen, to find Peter Stayton, booted to the hips, his visored cap drawn over his haggard face, fussing with the coffeepot on the stove. He whirled suspiciously at the sound of her steps, and, seeing that she was alone, spoke gruffly:

"Where ye been, Rose Ruby? I want my breakfast."

"It's nearly ready. I didn't know ye'd git back so quick. I went upstairs——"

"What fer?"

"I thought mebbe they'd be wantin' to eat up there."

He strode to the kitchen door, flung it wide, and stood there, tugging morosely at the ends of his ragged mustache. A moment later, his daughter's light step whipped him around. For an instant they stared at each other across the room.

"We-ell!" he sneered at last. "Ye've come down to breakfast, have ye? I should think ye'd have the decency to keep yore face hid till ye go!"

Her unwavering gaze clung to his face—unshaven, ravaged by the turbulence of his passion until it was scarcely recognizable. An overwhelming pity for him was in her eyes, but her silence, her still, white face, lashed him to more terrible virulence.

"An' *he's* comin' down, too, eh? Ye expect me to sit at table with him? By Heaven, do ye think I'll stand fer that?"

"It doesn't matter whether you sit at table with

us or not, father," she told him quietly. "Richard is coming down to breakfast, of course."

"Oh, of course, eh?"

At that he pounded out of the house, took a few resolute steps down the path, came back, flung his hat on the floor, and, with a great clatter, jerked out his customary chair at the table and sat down.

"So that's your game, is it?" he thundered. "Tryin' to put me out of my own house, to scare me away from my own table, for him? We-ell, if ye think you're goin' to cheat me out of my own rights, ye think wrong, my girl!"

There was so much pathos, so much of the old, lovable contrariety in the childish reversal, that her eyes swam for a moment in a hot mist of tears. The next moment, Richard's step on the stairs threw her into a nervous tremor. He came in, newly shaved, and with his hair sleeked back from his temples, like a little boy fresh from a doting mother's assiduous efforts. The ordeal of the night seemed to have washed the healthy tan from his skin and left him deadly pale, with eyes set in dark pools of shadow.

He stood hesitant in the doorway, his questioning gaze pinned to the girl. She smiled reassuringly across at him.

"Sit down, Richard! I'm just bringing the coffee."

Obediently he went to the table. For an embarrassed moment he stood there, staring doubtfully at the averted face of the old man, while he waited for Dorcas to take her place.

She went briskly about her serving and pouring.

"Hash, father?"

"What do ye think I set down fer—to be sociable?" he bellowed, and raised his eyes to glare

venomously across at Richard. "Don't I always take hash?"

She served him in silence, though her lips were bloodless, in sharp contrast to Richard's purpling cheeks. The sun was flooding in at the windows, bringing with it a tang of warm, moist earth and rain-washed flowers. From the beach came the guttural chant of a fisherman bailing out his boat, but in the big kitchen a heavy, prophetic silence held the trio at the table. Once during the meal Dorcas leaned forward and touched Richard's arm lightly.

"You must eat," she whispered.

The old man, whose bloodshot eyes had followed the gesture, though her words had been inaudible, let out a derisive guffaw, which became an ostentatious cough under his daughter's swift glance.

Painfully ill at ease, holding himself in a vise of restraint, vaguely conscious that in some unaccountable manner he had been made to feel an infamous tyrant instead of the aggrieved and martyred parent he had pictured himself, Peter's resentment churned within him. The pale, serene face of the girl and Richard's tragic eyes clogged the imprecations that crowded in his throat, and he gulped them back with huge swallows of scalding coffee.

His cup was empty long before the others, but he refused a second with a furious wag of his head. He sat motionless, watching them from beneath his beetling brows, until they rose. Then he swaggered to the door, jabbed a toothpick between his lips, and, with a final glare of defiance, stumped across the lawn to the still-swathed launch.

Dorcas had started automatically to clear the table, but she paused to follow that gaunt figure with her eyes. When it had disappeared, she turned to Rich-

ard, and her lips lifted in a tremulous smile. The despair in his eyes had deepened. He would have spoken, but for her hurried words:

"Why don't you go up and try to rest while I'm clearing up? Try to rest—and forget, until I come."

"Forget!" he echoed, but turned toward the hall door. It was as if he moved only in response to her voice. It was due to her whispered command that he had eaten and drunk. Now he looked back at her as if to gather from her encouraging smile sufficient strength to carry him up the stairs to the cluttered room in the tower.

CHAPTER XV

THE VISITOR

DORCAS watched him, and then turned almost eagerly back to her dishes. In the familiar, homely tasks of clearing the table, brushing the crumbs from the snowy cloth, sudsing the hot water until it flecked her arms with white foam—in all this there was a comforting sense of her everyday routine.

Yet upstairs, in the same room where he had made her his vows, waited the man she loved—the man who was linked irrevocably to another woman; and on her horizon hovered the dark, soundless wings of scandal. She fought off the panic that threatened her at the thought, and concentrated hardily on her work. She was drying her hands on the roller towel beside the sink, when a hearty voice boomed from the doorway.

"Well, well! How is the little housewife this morning?"

She turned to meet the clergyman's jovial smile, while the blood mounted in her cheeks and her breath came hot and short. He bustled over to her, all twinkling good humor.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Beckwith!"

He glanced brightly around the kitchen. "Where is that young man of yours, anyhow?"

"In—upstairs in the tower," she faltered.

"Tower!" he ejaculated. "That far away already? Well, come along!" He captured her hand and drew

her with him toward the door. "I want to have a look at the man who can put three flights of stairs between himself and his bride! Come along!"

As they started up the narrow flight leading to the tower, Dorcas hurried ahead. When she opened the door of the little room, her eyes alone caught the picture of that figure hunched in the rocker and looking desolately out to sea.

"Richard!" He leaped to his feet wildly, but before he could come to her she hurried on, trying desperately to conceal her anxiety. "We have a caller. Mr. Beckwith has come to see us."

Richard summoned a strained smile and motioned the little man to a chair. Dorcas, her hands locked in helpless misery, dropped weakly down on the couch. Mr. Beckwith relaxed, panting from his climb, and his merry glance went to Richard, who was still standing uncertainly at the door.

"Come, come—don't mind me," he admonished. "Sit down, boy—sit down, and don't think you have to go out in the hall to do it. There's plenty of room beside that blushing damsel on the couch!" His laugh filled the room as Richard seated himself beside the girl. "That's right! Now we're all comfy—all here in the same room, but with a difference, eh? The sun is shining, and you're man and wife. Well, well!" He wagged his head gravely.

"I couldn't resist the temptation to come down and do a little post-nuptial talking," he went on, "especially since you're more my responsibility than most of my young couples." He beamed upon them. "I married you without the usual formality of a license, you see. It's my job to see you started off right."

The genial ring had gone from his voice, and a gentle solemnity had crept into it.

"You both know what a serious affair marriage is—I can see that. It's serious and holy, and there's probably nothing nearer heaven on this old earth than a happy marriage."

He leaned back in his chair, flung one short leg over the other, and fitted his fingers together, tip to tip. The familiar symphony of everyday, jog-trot activities rode in through the open windows; but in the room a sepulchral silence held the man and the girl on the couch, while Mr. Beckwith's kindly meditations formed themselves into words.

"I don't know you, Richard," he mused, his eyes still on his peaked fingers; "but I know a fine face when I see one. I know Dorcas. I knew her mother before her. An angel, *she* was—a fine, sterling angel in percale; and a beautiful woman, too. Did you know that your mother was beautiful, Dorcas?"

"Y-yes," she whispered. "I knew that."

"And good," he added softly. "She was everything she should be, without being dull. Some good women are dull, you know. Oh, I admit it, bless their souls; but your mother was beautiful and good and merry, like yourself. If she'd been here last night, she'd have danced and wept at the same time. That's the sort of woman your mother was!"

He drew in a deep breath and flung his arms wide, as if in submission to the inexplicable mysteries of life.

"But the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. She wouldn't have wept much, if she had known that her little daughter was going to be happy with the man she loved." He bent forward impulsively. "You *do* love him, Dorcas?"

The abrupt question brought the girl's head up as if the plump hand he extended had been placed beneath her chin. Her eyes were swimming as she nodded, and the effort it cost her to speak shook her body like an ague.

"I love him! I love him! I wish my mother were here, so that I could tell her—everything!"

"But she is, she is! You may be sure of that, my dear," he said fervently. "And Richard loves you—eh, young man? I like to hear it. Next to the Bible, no words were ever printed or spoken that were more beautiful—more sacred."

"I do!" From Richard's dry lips the declaration came with a fierce rush. "God knows I do! I would die for her—gladly. Perhaps——"

"Tut, tut!" blurted the little man, and fumbled for his handkerchief. "*Live* for her is what you mean, boy—and you've got something to live for, I tell you! Here you are standing on the threshold, with all life before you!" He blew his nose with terrible violence. "If I'm not mistaken, I'm seeing the consummation of an ideal love. It makes my old heart flutter to see you—two young people, happy, healthy, and in love!"

He relaxed against the chair back and regarded them through a film of happy tears that he no longer tried to hide.

"And both of you as solemn and silent as a couple of well-behaved youngsters in Sunday school!" He chuckled. "And here I am ranting on like this and making you miserable! But that's my way. I talk too much—always did. Dorcas, if that's a tear on your cheek, I'm going to make your husband spank you!"

She brushed her hand across her eyes—a hand that

was mottled red and white from the grip in which its mate had held it.

"I didn't come down here to make you cry, little bride"—the jovial face was suddenly grave—"but a tear in time, as my mother used to say, saves ninety-nine. Better to shed them all now than later. Better to realize now that it's a serious step you've taken—you and your solemn young man here. He knows it, I'm sure. He's older than you—but not too much. He knows your problems don't begin and end with just you two." Mr. Beckwith's voice dropped to a reverent tenderness. "That's one of the things I wanted to speak to you about—those other little souls that God will send to bless you."

The girl's head drooped lower, to hide the crimson flood that swept up her throat and face, but Richard's cheeks were ashen, his eyes fixed in a trancelike stare.

"You aren't going to mind my talking like this when you know that I couldn't sleep nights if I didn't get some of these things off my interfering old mind, will you? You'll be such a mother as your own mother was, Dorcas, my dear." His voice was very gentle now. "That's the culmination of a love like yours—children, new little souls and clean, vigorous bodies. They'll be something to be proud of, with the fine Stayton blood in their veins, and the fear of God and the beauty of love that you'll give them. Don't deny them, my young friends! Don't shut out those little voices! There are too many clamoring at closed gates and pushing their way through into godless, sordid existences because selfishness shuts them out of better places."

He hustled over to Dorcas and laid his hand lovingly on her shoulder.

"There, child, I'm through preaching. You'll forgive me. You'll know I talked because I loved you. I've loved you ever since the day you winked at me out of your mother's arms. You were a week old, then. I'm through now. You've only to be happy!"

He looked quizzically across at Richard, stroking the girl's hair softly as he spoke.

"I'm a happy old duffer this morning. You've made me happy—you two blessed young people."

With a gesture that was purged of its theatric flavor by the rugged sincerity that impelled it, he raised his free hand in an attitude of benediction above their heads.

"God bless you, my children, God bless you!"

The next instant he was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

CONFLICT

DORCAS had not moved from her position on the couch. She still sat, her head drooping, her eyes on her locked fingers, the crimson flood ebbing from her cheeks, while she fought for self-command. She knew that Richard's eyes were upon her, and she sensed in his attitude some new, decisive change that made her feel infinitely removed from him.

Watching her, seeing the bleak apprehension in her face, Richard's own anguish was swallowed up in a great wave of compassion. With a tremendous effort he held himself away from her while he spoke.

"Dorcas dear, you see how it is. I must go. I can't stay on here any make you suffer like this!"

"No, no!" she cried. "Richard, you can't leave me!"

"I must!"

"No!" she cried again, and then, with a hopeless sob: "Oh, why, *why* did this have to happen to us, Richard? Why?"

She was facing him, but the question was flung at the erratic Fates whose grim caprices she only now discerned. Mutinous, defiant, she flung the challenge to those enigmatic sisters.

"Richard, Richard, why did this thing happen to us?"

He flung back his head, as if to add his own importunity to hers.

"Yes, why?" he echoed. "But it has happened, and it is all my fault."

"*Your* fault?"

"I shouldn't have let myself love you. I shouldn't have let myself submit to that ghastly thing last night. I should have died first! I've brought all this on you, when God knows I would have given my life to prevent it!"

"And whose fault is it, then, that I love you?"

He stepped back from the overwhelming appeal of that little, immature figure so close to his own, with the defiant demand hanging on her white lips.

"Who knows but that is my fault, too? Perhaps, if I had gone away——"

"And left me to discover it, after you had gone?" she cried. "Oh, no, Richard! Love doesn't come because we will it." Her lips were trembling now. Like a dazed child that has bruised its body in futile batterings at a closed door, and at last resorts to supplicating entreaty, she lifted her brimming eyes to his. "And *you* love me, Richard! You didn't will that!"

He looked down at her then, and there was a terrible calm in his eyes.

"Yes," he admitted. "Yes, it is there—my love for you—the only sacred love I have ever known. It has become so much a part of me that if it were taken away from me now, I should be an empty shell."

His voice was athrob. Dorcas was listening, so white, so quiet, that she might have died there, an exquisite memorial to their passion.

"When I found that I loved you, I planned to go away and carry my memory of you with me, like a torch; but I didn't reckon with fate. I never dreamed

that you could love me, or that my love could hurt you!"

"I know that, Richard, I know that!" she whispered.

"But it has hurt you, and it will hurt you more if I stay."

She nodded, but her chin and lips were trembling.

"Oh, Richard, must you go—and leave me—now?"

With an inarticulate cry he caught her to him and held her close, while his haggard eyes lifted in a voiceless prayer for strength.

"Don't, don't cry, my darling! Don't cry!"

"Oh, you can't leave me here alone, Richard!"

"I *must*!" he breathed.

Her head sank lower on his breast.

"You won't go to-day—not to-day?"

"Oh, my dear, my dear, how can I go—ever?"

"But you must," she said, and neither saw the pathos of that swift reversal.

It was old Peter's stamp on the stairs that tore them apart. A guilty crimson flooded their faces as, with a peremptory tap on the door, he let himself into the little room.

Something of the girl's defiance returned as she saw him come in, and she spoke evenly.

"Are you looking for me, father?"

"Am I lookin' fer ye?" he mocked. "I'm lookin' fer somebody to get my dinner. Ye sent Rose Ruby off, an' then ye come up here to spoon and to soft soap the parson when he come to call and give ye his blessin'!"

"I'll come down, father."

But this was not what he wanted. He hurried on as if she had not spoken.

"I saw him goin' out after ye'd got through with

him. He was usin' his best pulpit talk on me, tellin' me what a fine son-in-law I had. I wanted to laugh in his face. Do ye think he'd 'a' wanted to come an' see ye if he knew why ye got married?"

"Is this what you came up to say, father?"

"Only some of it," he roared, his fury rising at her tone. "He told me it was likely ye wouldn't be leavin' to-day. We'll, I come up to tell ye the sooner ye leave, the better pleased I'll be. I don't want no wantons in my house!"

Richard sprang forward at the words.

"That's enough, Mr. Stayton! We'll have no more words like that! My Heaven, how can you? You're her father!"

"I ain't! I won't own to it!"

"Whether you own to it or not, she's your daughter. You must be mad!"

"I be!" bellowed the old man. "Mad as a March hare, and who wouldn't be? The Good Book says there's hope fer a repentant sinner, but is *she* repentant? Look at her, and yourself, too—after what ye've done! If you'd confessed your wrongdoin' an' asked my forgiveness, I'd 'a' granted it!" Peter was speaking to the girl alone now. "But ye can go now—do ye hear? Ye can go out of my house. I don't want no——"

"Wait! Don't say any more until I've warned you!" The white passion of the younger man was in startling contrast to the distorted face of old Peter. "I warn you that if you say another word against your daughter, I shall forget you are her father! I shall treat you as I would any other offensive old man!"

"And who are ye, that ye think ye can talk to me like that?" sneered the old man.

"Who I am doesn't matter. The point is that the girl is under my protection right now, and I propose to defend her with every ounce of strength in my body. You can't insult her!"

"Ha!" roared the old man, maddened beyond all control. "Fine talk—as good as a actor on the stage! That's the way they do it! You're good at fine talk!"

Richard leaped to the door and flung it open.

"Get out!" he commanded. "Stay out until you've come to your senses! You have caused enough trouble in this room. Now get out of it!"

Peter backed falteringly through the doorway, while surprise mingled comically with the rage in his old eyes.

"Threaten me, will ye?" he roared. "Threaten me—an' she let ye! So I've caused trouble fer ye, have I? We-ell, I'll be causin' more if ye don't get out. Once I let loose on ye——"

But the door swung to on the old man's imprecations.

Richard sank back against the panels, his anger snuffed out as swiftly as it had flamed into life, his distraught gaze on the girl crumpled up on the couch.

CHAPTER XVII

WEARY HOURS

WHEN Peter Stayton stumbled down the tower stairs and into the sunny kitchen, his passion became a devouring flame. That short and terrible encounter with the man he hated had swept away the final remnants of his control. He sought his old place on the doorstep beneath the climbing morning glories, and sat down with his knees hunched up beneath his chin, his eyes fixed sightlessly before him.

All his brooding resentment had focalized on Richard—the man who had robbed first his daughter and then himself, the man for whom she had broken the fifth commandment after nearly a score of dutiful, devoted years. For him she had turned against her own father, who had tried only to save her from disgrace; but it was the man's fault, not the girl's. He had poisoned her against her own father, so that she had stood by and seen the old man ordered from his own house—had permitted the door to be slammed in his face!

The noonday sun poured relentlessly through the latticework above him full on his brooding face, and rode slowly westward, leaving him in checkered shade; but he was unconscious of everything save his gloomy thoughts.

It was Rose Ruby who roused him. She came stealthily around a corner of the house, walking on the grass, so that the crunch of pebbles on the walk

should not announce her approach. Her face was thrust forward, as if her halting steps could not keep pace with the avid gallop of her curiosity. The green dress had been put carefully by for another state occasion, and in her fringed shawl and rusty, black skirt she had the appearance of a sublimated scarecrow.

She paused at sight of the crouching figure on the doorstep. So silently had she come that Peter was unaware of her presence until she was almost upon him. Then he reared his head and gave her a malevolent glance.

"We-ell! What d'ye want?"

"Nothin'," she said. "Had your dinner?"

"Dinner!" he echoed vaguely.

She nodded, and peered beyond him into the immaculate kitchen.

"Ye mean to say ye ain't had nothin' since breakfast?"

"No—don't want nothin'."

"An' here it is the middle of the afternoon!" Her yellow smile shone forth, slyly triumphant. "I told ye ye'd be needin' me. Brides ain't reliable, I say!"

His only response to that was a low grunt. She went past him—a trifle timidly, for his face was a fearsome thing to see—into the kitchen, and lifted off the lid of the stove. He heard her clucking her tongue in pleased disapproval over the cold fire box and rummaging noisily in the wood bin.

"I'll make ye a cup of tea," she told him.

"I don't want nothin' to eat," he said.

Ignoring his refusal, she went on with her tasks, filling the kettle, taking down a cup and saucer from the shelf, cutting thick slices of bread.

She wagged her head and tactfully converted the incipient grin on her lips to a melancholy pucker. With his arms sprawled across the table, Peter's thoughts followed her own up to the little tower room, the door of which had been so unceremoniously closed upon him. The old woman poured the water over the tea leaves with knotty, withered hands that had lost nothing of their deftness. She placed the bread and butter before him, and filled his cup.

"I don't want it," he protested gloomily, but she sugared his tea and stirred it for him.

"Lucky fer her that he married her!" she observed. She waited in suspense for Peter's response; but the fire in his bloodshot eyes was not for her.

"But ye notice he did, don't ye?" Peter took a huge gulp of tea, and drew the back of his hand across his mouth. "Ye notice he did marry her, eh?"

"Oh, yes, he married her, all right," she admitted, with a lift of her bony shoulders; "but it ain't like to last long—a marriage like that!"

"Ain't likely to last?" he echoed.

"What's marriage to *him*?" she scoffed.

The old man stared incredulously at her, a new horror supplanting the old.

"What does he want of a girl like her fer a wife, when like as not he could 'a' had his pick of city girls?" she demanded hoarsely. "If he'd wanted to marry her, wouldn't he 'a' asked her before—before the other night?"

The horrible significance of that eclipsed all Peter's other fears. Two days of agony had crushed and weakened his reasoning defenses, and left his mind a vulnerable target for the old woman's sen-

tient shafts. She saw the effect she had produced, and went on with added zest:

"He's a city man, an' rich. Why should he come out here lookin' fer a wife? That's what I want to know! She may suit him well enough out here, but how'll she suit him when he gets her to the city, with all his smart friends laughin' at him fer marryin' a hick? That's what *they'll* call her—a hick!"

"A hick!" Peter repeated.

Rose Ruby walked over to the stove, running her tongue around her lips, as if to enjoy the last luscious drop of some rare beverage. She poked the fire ruminatively for a moment before she said, with a resigned sigh:

"Well, he *did* marry her—that's somethin', even if it don't last. She's a missis. That's what I said when my old man quit. 'Well,' I said, 'I'm a missis, anyhow, an' that's a lot more than some folks around here can say!'"

But this final bit of philosophy was lost upon the old man. The word "hick" was still ringing derisively in his ears. Hick, they'd call her, would they? Hick!

The sun, peering redly in at the west windows of the tower, found Richard and the girl facing each other across the litter of half-packed bags and trunks. Exhausted, sapped of every vestige of color, the futile evolutions of her emotions had brought the girl to a state of lassitude bordering on coma.

It seemed to Richard, looking helplessly across at her, that she had grown thinner in those brief twenty-four hours, that her firm cheeks had sunk, as if from an illness. Her voice was thin and dispassionate as

she came back again to the phrase on which their long, dreary discourse had been built.

"I *can't* stay here now, Richard. Surely you can see that!"

"I do. I see how you must feel; but, as I've told you, he spoke in anger. He doesn't understand."

"I must, Richard—I must. You shouldn't have kept me here so long. I told you, when he had gone downstairs, that I wouldn't stay another night. Look, it is almost night now—we should have gone this afternoon."

"We!" he repeated. "We!"

"I thought," she said wanly, "that we could start away together. That would make it look as if we really were going—together. It would save his pride—and mine."

He caught her hands in his.

"And do you think, if we started away together, that I could ever let you go? Do you think I could see you swallowed up in the crowd without calling you back to me? Have you forgotten that I love you?"

"No," she said. "No, Richard—I feel as if we had lived and loved and suffered together for a thousand years. Now I can bear suffering."

"We have suffered together," he said passionately. "It is easier to suffer with some one you love than to suffer alone."

"Yet *you* will suffer alone," she reminded him gently.

"I am different. I'm a man, and I have suffered alone for many years; but you!" He sprang to his feet. "Let *me* tell your father, let me tell him everything, so that he'll turn against me and back to you!"

"Never! Never!" The indomitable decision behind those vehement words was a bequest from old Peter Stayton himself. "Do you think I would demean myself to ask his mercy, when he should ask mine? I would die first!"

Richard knew that there was no appeal from that. He stood at the narrow door of the balcony and watched the dusk creeping over the swamp meadows below. He watched a yellow puppy, from a fisherman's shack down the road, stalk an imaginary bird in the shrubs. He watched, but saw nothing.

When he turned back to Dorcas, still sitting with quiet, folded hands in her lap, still in that patient attitude of waiting, a wild panic took possession of him. The little room seemed suddenly crowded, stuffy—like a cell. If he could get out, it might perhaps be easier to think.

"Dorcas, I'm going out. If I walk a little, perhaps I shall think of something I can do that will help us both."

He reached for his cap.

"Richard"—she lifted her eyes, full of anxiety—"you won't—you aren't going far?"

"Far? No—only promise me you'll not leave this room until I come back."

CHAPTER XVIII

STALKERS

FROM the step beneath the climbing morning-glory vines, old Peter watched the sun set and the lurking shadows of dusk sweep over the lawn. Here he had sat, since Rosy Ruby left him, to contemplate the unhealthy growth she had sown in his mind—had sat and listened and watched for some sign from the little high room which his thoughts had never once left.

When at last he heard Richard's step in the hall, he jerked himself to his feet and stepped swiftly back into the voluminous foliage of a lilac bush, to wait in hiding, like some sinister bird of prey, for he knew not what.

The fact that Richard emerged from the kitchen door alone, and still in his familiar tweeds, dumfounded the old man. It was not that his pent-up fury had crystallized into any definite plan of vengeance. It was not that he had expected any specific move. He had indeed dimly foreseen the hasty departure of both offenders. Now, in the casual appearance of one without the other, in the unchanged tweeds and the apparent nonchalance of the man on whom his venom was focused, he read only a heartless indifference to his sufferings.

It was an involuntary impulse that drew him from the concealing branches of the lilac bush and across the lawn after the tall figure of the younger man.

The strange pursuit led down the road to the beach—slowly, at first, for Richard walked with the stiffness of nerve-taut knees and thighs; but his stride quickened as they neared the water.

When they had reached the inlet that curved into the sluice, Richard turned back. Peter, who had known that he must do so, waited, crouching behind an overturned dory, until his prey was a few yards in advance of him before he crept forth to resume the pursuit.

Now Richard's steps lagged. Once he stopped to light a cigarette, and the nonchalance of the gesture brought to the old man's lips a horrible curse that issued forth in a hoarse whisper. Back to the road, back toward the white house—where Richard faltered for a moment before he strode on past it—past the scattered cottages and Rose Ruby's dilapidated shack, on to the junction where the road turned down toward the village. Here Richard whirled about suddenly and came face to face with his pursuer.

Save for the stars, and the sickly light of the single street lamp a few yards up the village road, the night was impenetrably dark. Save for the pallid outlines of his face, Richard could see nothing of the man with whom he had so nearly come into collision; yet he knew at once that it was old Peter Stayton. He knew it by the great, gaunt figure and rakish visored cap; knew it more definitely by the muttered oath that escaped the old man's lips.

"Oh, Mr. Stayton! I beg your pardon—I didn't see you——"

Peter thrust his face forward and spoke thickly.

"But I seen *you*! Ain't I been seein' ye ever since ye left the house fer your little evenin' stroll—alone? What's the matter? Don't Dorcas care about walk-

in' with ye any more, like she used to? Er is it that you're tired of her already, an' tryin' to sneak off without her? Eh?"

"You're talking nonsense, Mr. Stayton, and you know it. I simply came out for a breath of air——"

"An' where do ye think ye're goin' now, eh? Back to my house ag'in, after I told ye to git out?"

His voice had risen to a roar. Richard raised a hand fearfully to placate him.

"Yes, yes, I'm going——"

The low, emphatic words, the younger man's palpable desire to avoid further preamble, tore away the last shreds of the old man's restraint.

"Then *go!*" he bellowed. "Get out o' here—an' don't never come back, ye dirty thief! Ye skulkin' coward! Ye sneakin' landlubber!"

It was the final eruption of Peter's volcanic wrath, and in its terrible overflow was his broken parental pride, his white-hot hatred of the man who had stolen his daughter, his memory of Rose Ruby's prophetic words; but not until he saw the sprawling figure at his feet did Peter realize that he had struck with his heavy fists.

For a moment he started down, his right arm still raised, his body shaken as if with ague. Then he bent over the formless huddle lying so still, so uncannily still, in the road. Many times he essayed to speak before the words finally came.

"Hey, you! Get up!" Again, when there was no response: "Get up—do you hear me?"

For an awful space a cold fear clutched at Peter's heart. Then he bent over and laid tentative fingers on the limp wrist half buried in the dust. With a grunt of relief he stood up, started off, came back, and dragged the inert body to the side of the road,

out of the path of a possible motor or wagon. Then, with a final glance over his shoulder, he hurried off toward the white house, as swiftly as his uncertain steps would carry him.

France again!

Fashionable Paris had scarcely finished its meager *petit déjeuner*, and the fronts of the smart shops along the Rue de la Paix were submitting to the operations of adroit window dressers, when Henri Deffand entered the establishment of the jeweler whose name was engraved on the cigarette case he carried.

Henri had been chosen for this important mission on the strength of his local reputation as a traveled personage; and if his pompous strut did not cause the flurry along the Parisian boulevards that he had perhaps expected, it was doubtless because there were so few pedestrians abroad at that early hour.

Something of his self-importance had left him when he entered the exclusive little shop and glanced in awe at the dazzling display of precious stones and metals in the cases about him. He waited for some moments before a dapper young clerk, who was polishing the mirrors in the back of the cases with chamois, deigned to notice him, and then it was with a curt word and a sharp glance that were in themselves a reflection on Henri's provincial clothes and sea-burned countenance.

"Well, what will you have, if you please?"

"If *you* please," said Henri politely, "I wish to speak with the proprietor—or the manager, or some one in authority. As you will see by this, it is a matter of great importance."

The clerk accepted the proffered envelope, which

bore in the corner the insignia of the *maire* of a Breton village. He looked at it suspiciously for a moment, and disappeared. He came back almost at once, and conducted Henri into a little strong box of a room where a plump little man, who was not quite so dapper as his clerk, was engaged like some modern Midas in counting—or perhaps inspecting—his jewels. The *maire's* note lay open before him, and the jeweler tapped it interrogatively when Henri stood before him.

"This note says that you would see me on a matter of importance."

Henri drew forth the slender, shining silver case, and snapped it apart with the air of a conjurer.

"This little *étui* has your name inside, monsieur—you can see that for yourself," he said politely.

The jeweler regarded this indisputable evidence of his workmanship gravely and a bit proudly.

"But yet!" he admitted. "A lady's case, I see, and of exquisite shape and design, as you have probably noticed. And the silver"—he shrugged—"as you see yourself, the silver is of the purest. We use nothing else."

"Then you recognize it?" said Henri triumphantly.

The jeweler's eyes disappeared beneath his upper lids.

"Does a mother recognize her own child?" he demanded indignantly. "Do you perhaps think we turn these exquisite things out by the gross—as the butcher does his sausages, my friend? No! Every one receives the same attention, the same particular consideration, that a babe receives from its own mother. That"—his brows and shoulders lifted in cautious justification of an anticipated complaint—"that is why we command a price that is possibly slightly

higher than other shops, dealing in inferior articles of this sort, dare demand. I would guarantee——”

“But, if you please,” broke in Henri uneasily, “it is not the price of the case about which I came to speak with you.”

“Not the price?” echoed the plump little man. “But naturally not, my friend. If you are any judge of——”

“But I am not, monsieur,” Henri hastened to admit. “I have only come to ask your assistance in tracing the owner.”

“May I ask,” ventured the jeweler suavely, “why it is important that you should trace the owner of this case?”

“Ah!” said Henri gravely. “If I said that I wished to trace the owner it is my mistake. It is not exactly that. Unfortunately we do not need to do that.” He crossed himself swiftly. “The owner is lying dead at our village.”

“Dead!” ejaculated the little man. “Ah, that is sad! An accident, I suppose?”

“A motor accident,” explained Henri solemnly. “Even now the car is lying on the beach, a wreck. We are trying to trace the woman’s connections through this case. It appears to be the only way.”

The jeweler looked speculatively at the initials, turned the case over in his hand, and disappeared into an anteroom where the records of his sales mounted ceilingward in dusty tiers. Henri heard him consulting a bookkeeper; and nine or ten minutes later he came back with a white slip of paper in his hand and a blend of triumph and concern in his eyes.

“It was a simple task that you set me,” he said seriously. “As it happens, I myself made the sale not six weeks ago. I recall it vividly. She was a

charming woman—an American, and rich.” He sighed. “So animated, so well spoken! Her French was faultless, I assure you.”

“But her name, monsieur,” pressed Henri politely.

“Was Sells—Mrs. Richard Sells, of New York—though I do not know her address. The case was delivered to the Hotel Lafayette—you know it, perhaps. She had honored us with her account for years—years. And now she is dead. That is sad—very sad.”

“Very,” agreed Henri, rising.

He moved toward the door, but the jeweler followed him.

“You will go now to the American consul, I presume?”

“Most certainly,” admitted Henri, and added meditatively: “If, as you say, she was rich, there will be no difficulty, I suppose, in locating her husband.”

“No difficulty whatever,” the jeweler assured him, suddenly becoming all affability. “And do not forget the little case, my friend. I expect it will go forward with the—er—body to the husband, who will doubtless wish to preserve it.”

Henri took the cigarette case, and endeavored to make his thanks as effusive as the little jeweler’s geniality deserved.

“You have been most kind, monsieur. I am truly much obliged.”

“Pooh, pooh!” protested the jeweler, with elaborate good nature, as he placed his hand confidentially over Henri’s. “Still, if I have made your task a trifle easier, perhaps, my good friend, you will do me a slight favor in return—a very slight favor.”

“You have but to name it,” said Henri politely.

The jeweler's voice dropped to a confidential whisper.

"Then, monsieur, if it is not asking too much, since you are going to the American consul, and since you are bound to learn the New York address of Madame Sells, perhaps you would be so *very* kind as to communicate it to me. You see, monsieur, it is a slight matter of business—the case had not yet been paid for."

CHAPTER XIX

A REFUGE

WHEN Richard opened his eyes, he lay for some time staring dazedly up at the stars through a wavering mist that lent them a kaleidoscopic effect. He raised his arm heavily and drew it across his eyes, only to discover that the mist appeared to be part of the beleaguering pain about his head and temples. His faltering hand came in contact with something damp and soft, which he fingered aimlessly for a moment before he recognized it as grass.

This awoke a vague perplexity in his mind, which gave place almost at once to a creeping lethargy. He fought it off, while the throb in his head became more acute. It was an annoying thing, that pain. It made him sleepy, and yet refused to let him sleep. Well, he would sleep in spite of it!

When he had made this petulant decision, he discovered that there was something the matter with his eyes. They refused to close properly. He was divided, now, into two fractions—the part of him that wanted to sleep, and the part that was an anvil on which a thousand demons forged a thousand red-hot pains.

When the demons finally triumphed over his lethargy, he essayed to lift his head, with a vague idea of going in search of water; but he fell back with an involuntary groan. His second effort was more successful. By slow degrees he raised himself until

he had achieved a sitting posture. Then, with a dumb instinct, he drew his hand through the dew-laden grass and laid the palm across his burning eyes.

As he sat there, he was facing the sea and the big white house in the distance. Peering through the darkness, his lurching gaze was caught and held by a double square of yellow light hanging high and steady over the night, like the disembodied eyes of some wistful giant. He stared for a long moment before he knew that he was looking at the windows in the lookout tower, and remembered that she was up there—waiting for him.

It was with one coherent thought riding clear of the muddled confusion in his head that he dragged himself to his feet and stood swaying uncertainly until he should recover some control of his trembling limbs. Then he deliberately turned his face away from the beach and the beckoning lights of the tower, and reeled up the road toward the village.

The effort of walking set all the demons of pain loose again, blinding his eyes, filling his ears with their roar. Half unconscious, he moved by instinct alone, staggering from side to side of the deserted road, lifting his feet high to avoid imaginary obstacles, skirting shadows that took on fancied substantiality, falling to his knees, only to drag himself up again. He was no longer aware of pain, for he was clinging with terrible tenacity to his objective—his desire to reach the village and the house of the kindly little clergyman.

The village was dark, save for the sparsely placed lamps along the road, and silent, save for the song of crickets and peepers. He fought his way across the common and down Maple Street to the ivy-laced church and rectory, fumbled up the steps, and pounded

heedlessly at the door before he saw and pulled at the bell. Its peal echoed sepulchrally through the silent house, but the hum and buzz in his ears deadened the sound, and he was still jerking it convulsively when the door swung inward, bringing him with it across the sill.

"What's this? What's this? Bless my soul! Wait until I set the lamp down."

The minister's voice was sharp with alarm as he set the lamp on a near-by table and bent over the sprawling figure.

"Why, he's been hurt! Bless my soul! My good friend, what is it?"

The fact that there was no recognition in the little man's eyes did not detract one whit from his voluble sympathy. Deftly he closed the door and bounced back to his unconscious caller. Deftly he laid a finger on the limp wrist before he hurried out to the kitchen, scattering sympathetic ejaculations in his wake.

"Poor fellow! Now *who* in the name of common sense—and hurt! Dear me! Bless my heart!"

He was back directly with a pitcher of water and a towel, to bend over the prostrate Richard, to whom had come, for a moment, the blessed oblivion he had been fighting off. Gently the clergyman turned the inert body toward him, and smoothed the clotted hair away with a dampened corner of the towel. The sight of the discolored face, puffed eyes, and swollen lips brought an indignant exclamation to his lips. With the wet towel he washed away the clinging bits of dirt, and squeezed a few drops of water between the parted lips. It was this, and the clergyman's steady flow of words, that brought Richard back to agonizing consciousness.

"Just rest so, my friend. You're quite all right.

Take a swallow of this, if you can manage it. It's the good Lord's own liquor. Now try not to move until I slip on some clothes and hop across the way for a doctor. He'll fix——"

"No—for Heaven's sake, no!"

The clergyman paused in his gentle ministrations, and stared incredulously down at those contorted lips through which the desperate cry had broken.

"No doctor? But—why, bless me! It can't be—it is—is it Dorcas' young man?"

"Yes—yes—you know—you married——"

"Of course, of course! Richard Sells, to be sure!"

"That's why—no doctor."

"But, my dear boy, you're hurt!"

"Yes—but doctor—mustn't know."

Richard's irritation that the words should come with such painful difficulty brought the weak tears to his eyes; but for the moment the little clergyman's incredulity outweighed his concern.

"The doctor mustn't know! Mustn't know what?"

"That I'm hurt."

He was struggling to raise himself. With Mr. Beckwith's help he sat up, propped against the wall. Then he explained with what seemed to him great clarity.

"That's why I came—to you."

"Yes, yes, and you did quite right, friend—quite right; but I'm not a doctor. More water? That's fine! Can you tell me how it happened?"

With the towel cool and moist against his head, Richard's senses partly cleared. He saw the spare little parson, with a blanket robe flung over his nightgown, from which his bare legs protruded, lean as a sparrow's, and with a pair of list slippers on his feet.

"I'll tell you—why I came——"

"But the accident!"

Richard shook his head petulantly.

"No accident——"

"Then, my dear boy, how——"

"It was her father—of course, he didn't understand."

"You mean Peter Stayton?" ejaculated the parson.

"You mean that Peter did this to you?"

Richard nodded heavily.

"He didn't under——"

"But why, man, *why?*"

Involuntarily he had shrunk away from the bruised and battered figure leaning against the wall.

"He was terribly angry. He struck me when I wasn't looking for it. He didn't understand."

"Understand what?" demanded the clergyman harshly. "I never knew Peter Stayton to strike a man down without cause."

There was so little comprehension in Mr. Beckwith's eyes that for a moment it seemed to Richard scarcely worth while to go on. He had so much to explain, too, when he might succumb, instead, to the enveloping languor that offered him merciful oblivion; but the thought of Dorcas kept him conscious.

"That was it—he thought he *had* cause. You married us, but you didn't see the gun."

"Gun!"

"In his pocket—pointing at us. He wouldn't let me talk—wouldn't let me tell him that I——"

A sudden fierce repugnance banished the puzzled distress on the little parson's face. He sprang to his feet and backed away.

"A gun! To make you marry Dorcas—was that it?" His voice was thin and high with emotion.

"So that was why you had no license! That was why you were going back to town—and Peter beat you to it!"

"Yes," admitted Richard, immensely relieved that he was understood at last. "Yes, he forced us to marry, you see."

The clergyman's plump hands were clenched, his eyes were shooting fire.

"So that's the sort you are! I was afraid of it when Peter came to me, and yet I thought, when I saw you this morning, that I had misjudged you!" Man and minister were at war within him now. "And Peter hit you!" He flung his arm across his eyes. "God forgive me, I can't blame him. And so you've crawled up here to me—why did you come here?"

"Because," explained Richard, doggedly patient, "I want you to patch things up between Dorcas and her father."

"Between Dorcas and her father! What do you mean by that!"

"She's going to leave him. He's put her out. She mustn't go. I should never sleep again."

Listening with his head cocked on one side, for the words came muffled and almost unintelligible from between the swollen lips, the clergyman's perplexity returned to mingle with his disgust.

"So she's leaving!" he said sharply. "Of course, why shouldn't she? You're not thinking of deserting her—now?"

"Yes—I'm going."

Mr. Beckwith took a step forward. His face was livid.

"And leave her?"

"No—she's going, too, but I can't take her. Her

father thinks she's going with me. He thinks it's all right—that she's my wife."

"And so she is!"

Richard shook his head, and spoke almost petulantly.

"But that's what I'm telling you—she isn't. He wouldn't listen when I tried to tell him that I was married."

"Married—before!"

The minister's voice was a thin whisper.

"Ten years," elaborated Richard, cutting his sentences shorter as they came with greater and greater difficulty. "Ten years of hell! Dorcas knows it, but Peter wouldn't listen. I didn't think he could manage it without a license. I thought I could explain later. I never meant——"

The clergyman turned his back on that grotesquely earnest face, and tried to shut out the mounting horror that assailed him.

"God, this is more than I can bear! And you come to me with it—to me!"

"For help," supplemented Richard stolidly. "You married us—you must keep our secret."

"Secret!" He took a threatening step toward the limp figure. "So that's all you're thinking of now, is it? You want me to hush it up!"

"For her sake," muttered Richard thickly.

"For *her* sake!" echoed the clergyman. "For *her* sake! So you've begun to think of her now, after the damage has been done—after what you've done to that innocent girl!"

The words brought Richard's drooping head up with a jerk.

"Done to her! My God, do *you* think, too——" He lifted a shaking forefinger. "After what her

father and *you* have done to her, you mean! *I* love her. Do you think I would harm her? You said you knew real love when you saw it. Well, you see it now! Do you think I would harm her? She's as pure as the day I came here, so help me God!"

And on the balcony of the lookout tower, where her mother and her grandmother had so often sat before her, wooing the dawn that might bring them tidings of absent husbands, Dorcas sat, crushed into a little heap, waiting throughout the long night for the man she loved.

When the pale emissary of dawn broke through the east, Henri Deffand was already ringing the courtyard bell of a house in the Champ de Mars section of Paris, laden with his grim message for the American consul, who was indulging in a second cup of *café au lait* over his copy of the *Matin*.

CHAPTER XX

BROKEN TIES

THE night—the longest he had ever known—wore away, with old Peter Stayton measuring off the interminable hours with his restless prowlings between the gate and the little back porch; hearing Richard's returning step in every stirring leaf, in the furtive scurry of furred or feathered night creatures.

As the hours dragged by and Richard did not come, the old man's sense of shame and guilt transcended the fierce resentment of those past few days, and he was assailed by remorse—self-loathing.

The feeble light from the high windows of the tower room poured steadily forth, and seemed to be reproaching him plaintively. Desperately he nursed his languishing sense of grievance. He told himself that what he had done had been in the girl's behalf; but the attempted justification failed to satisfy him. There had been a certain ennobling dignity in the attitude of Dorcas and Richard, beside which his own conduct seemed more and more inglorious.

The thought of the girl alone in the tower, awaiting her husband's return, recurred to torture him each time his reluctant gaze was drawn to those lighted windows. Well, presently, he told himself, she would come down in search of Richard, and would hear the tale of his ignominious collapse. It would not be an easy tale to tell. Indeed, shame burned old Peter at the prospect; but it would prove

to her, at least, that the man who had betrayed her was unworthy of her allegiance.

He fell asleep at last beneath the dew-heavy morning-glory vines, with his head against the door jamb, and woke to see another dawn stalking mistily across the lawn. For a moment he sat blinking, held by a dumb misery whose source he could not trace. Then he rose, cramped and chilly, and flung a swift glance toward the tower.

The light had gone out of the windows, as if their long vigil had rendered them sightless. Dew lay thickly on the grass and shrubs. There was an incipient elation in old Peter's heart as he swung off down the road. Richard had not come back!

Of this Peter was certain, since the front door had been locked, and his own huddled body had blocked the back entrance. Richard had not come back—he had run away! Or could he still be lying there unconscious—dead, perhaps?

The old man's elation was snuffed out by the thought. Fear urged him forward now—fear that he might find that prostrate figure where he had left it beside the road; remorse that passion should have made of him its purblind agency.

When he reached the crossroads, and stood where he had stood last night, his breath was coming hard and fast. Here was the spot, here was an impression in the long grass where Richard had lain; but that was all. Even the tweed cap, which Peter remembered to have seen lying beside the huddled figure, was gone.

There was a grim consolation for him in this discovery. A dying man, or even one seriously wounded, would not be likely to retrieve a fallen cap. His elation came back with a rush, mingled with

contempt, and with sudden pity for Dorcas, who had waited all night in the tower for her lover.

Well, the fellow had gone like a yellow dog, had tucked his tail between his legs and run. It was what old Peter had wanted—a final proof of the city man's worthlessness, a final verification of his own suspicions. The girl was a Stayton, and a Stayton would forgive much, but not cowardice. She had been loyal to the cur, but now she would despise him. Peter would have his girl again!

The thought lubricated his cramped muscles as he swung up the path toward the back door. He would make a pot of coffee, and would carry her a cup. Oddly enough, he was no longer thinking of her own guilty participation in the affair. Somehow Richard's flagrant desertion had absolved her. He saw her now as a child, swept off her feet by a suave scoundrel, and deceived and abandoned by him. He saw her weeping out her sorrow on her father's breast, coming back to him, a repentant daughter. He would forgive her.

He was pulsating with eagerness as he hurried around to the porch and up the steps. The door stood open, as he had left it, and an aroma of freshly boiling coffee greeted him. Dorcas stood beside the stove with a cup in her hand. She glanced up at him for a fleeting instant before she lifted the coffee-pot and tipped it over the cup.

He was held there, first by astonishment, then by a creeping apprehension born of an unwonted strangeness in her appearance. His eager hopes chilled, and the words of comfort he had intended to speak withered on his lips. It was a long moment before his fumbling senses accounted for the physical change in her.

Instead of the habitual, bright gingham frock, she was wearing the street dress reserved for those rare occasions when she went to town. A straight little dark-blue garment it was, with a severe white collar and cuffs. Its darkness accentuated the pallor of her skin. Its long, close lines added to her height and lent her a sedateness, as if she had unconsciously dressed not her body, but her abruptly matured soul.

After that first cursory glance, she did not look at him again, but poured her coffee, went to the table, dropped a cube of sugar into the cup, and started with it toward the hall door. With his conciliatory hopes clipped by her cold ignoring of his presence, Peter's wrath flooded back afresh.

"Mebbe you're goin' to look fer him, eh?" he snarled. "Fer that fine, gallant husband of yours! Well, you'll sure have to grease your shoes, girl!"

His taunt had the desired result. Dorcas turned back again, but now her eyes were wide with sudden suspicion. Peter laughed boisterously.

"Did he leave a forwardin' address with you? You know where he's gone, I calc'late! Oh, sure!"

She came slowly back to the table, set her steaming cup down with stilted precision, and faced him.

"Do *you*?" she whispered. "Do *you*?"

"Oh, sure—sure!" he gloated. "Don't think he'd leave *me* without tellin' me his address, so I could send him a Christmas card, do you?"

She took a sip of coffee, held there by a growing fear, an intuitive sense, that there was more behind her father's words than his desire to wound her. Eager questions crowded to her lips, but pride kept them back—pride and the fear of humbling herself or of betraying Richard.

"Now he's gone," he sneered, "I *would* run after

him—that's what I'd do, sure! I guess you'll find he needs a nursemaid, all right! But you'll have to hurry if you want to catch up with him, I calc'late."

He only stopped then because her pallor and the uncertainty of the step she took toward him frightened him. Contrary to his hopes, she did not reply, but stood looking up at him, her left hand laid over her heart, where it contrasted sharply with the dark stuff of her dress. Then she turned and hurried away, passing through the hall and up the stairs to her own room, where he heard her quick footsteps over his head.

Peter waited in a maze of fury, bewilderment, and disgust, hugging to himself his knowledge of Richard's ignominious departure, reserving it jealously against the vague emergency that he anticipated. When he heard her coming down, he strode into the hall and stood at the foot of the stairs.

She was wearing a little, close-fitting hat and carrying a bulky suit case. A pair of kid gloves—indisputable evidence of her intentions—hung from her free hand. The sight threw Peter into a panic. He stood, a quivering barricade, at the bottom step, one hand on the newel post, the other spread against the wall.

"So you're goin', eh?"

Her glance went through and beyond him.

"Let me pass, please!"

"Pass!" he echoed. "I ought to thrash you within a inch of your life fer not havin' the spunk of a jelly-fish!"

"But of course you wouldn't dare," she said quietly. "Let me pass, please!"

He wagged his head from side to side, like an enraged beast.

"Where do you think you're goin'?"

"When you ordered me from your house," she said contemptuously, "you did not tell me where to go!"

"I—I ordered *him* out of my house!" he bel-
lowed.

"And me," she reminded him.

"Be you goin' after him? Have you sunk that low—when he's deserted the ship and left ye to swab the deck? Is that the sort of woman you are?"

"Perhaps," she said. "And now will you let me pass, please?"

The fact that he could not rouse her in her own defense, and the sight of her white, determined face, reduced him to a paroxysm of rage.

"Don't worry—I'll let you pass!" he screamed. "Go find him, if you can! You'll know him by his color—it's yellow! You'll find him hidin' some-
wheres—behind his mother's skirts, likely—with a couple of nice black eyes I give him as a token of my friendship, and with his nice, purty necktie all mussed up like his lyin' face! Oh, you'll find him, but not hereabouts—not where *I* can get my hands on him again—not by a long shot!" Peter laughed raucously. "He warn't any too tickled with his bargain anyway. All he needed was a little encouragement from me to shift his helm and steer fer his home port. *That's* what you married—a lubberly swab! If you want that kind of a husband, go get him! Go find him, an' kiss away his tears!"

As he talked, her weary quiescence was replaced by an alert attentiveness, by a sudden horrified comprehension. She put her hand on the stair rail for support.

"You—you mean you fought? You and Richard?"

"Fought!" he snarled. "Yellow dogs don't fight—they run. Your noble young man warn't no exception to the rule."

"You struck him?"

It was as if she spoke in order to convince herself.

"That's a ladylike word. What I done to him warn't ladylike. I'm sorry I done it, too. If I 'a' knowed what he was, I wouldn't 'a' dirtied my hands on him. I'd 'a' horsewhipped him—that's the kind of medicine one deals out to yellow dogs. *Now* do you think you'll go and find him, now that you know what he is—now that he's run away from you?"

He had roused Dorcas at last. He fell back under no mean counterpart of his own fury

"You—you struck him—you struck Richard? Where is he? What have you done with him? You've killed him!"

"I wish I had!" Peter roared.

She shrank away from the old man, the back of her hand against her mouth, her eyes full of ineffable horror.

"You—you did that—after everything else—you, my own father? But you're not, you're not! I shall never call you that again—never! I hate you, I despise you! I never want to see your face again!"

She was hurrying across the hall and through the kitchen. He stumbled along behind her, his world reeling in the red haze of his wrath.

"Then go—and God forgive you! You'll pay fer them words! I told you what he was. I may have been wrong to hit him, but it showed him up fer what he was. If you desert your own father fer him now, you'll deserve what you get!"

"You're not my father!" she flung back at him. "You're not my father! You don't know what you've done! You don't know—you don't know——"

The words floated over her shoulder, a sorrowful repudiation, as she hurried down the path, her slight figure dragged down by the weight of the bulky suit case. Peter raised his arms, and for a moment they wavered above him irresolutely, but the curse that had risen to his lips metamorphosed itself into a feeble invocation.

"My God! My God, help me! Dorcas—Dorie—come back!"

But she was walking swiftly up the road, between the waving fields of beach grass. Her father's hoarse appeal merged itself into the plash of water against the sand and the guttural rasp of old Timmy Frye's voice raised in a jovial chantey as he staked off his oyster spawn.

CHAPTER XXI

LAWS OF LOVE

MR. BECKWITH shifted the weight of the immaculately swathed tray he was carrying, so that one hand should be free, and knocked lightly on the door of the rectory spare bedroom; but it was not like him to await a formal response, and he bustled in immediately, his voice lifted in a cheery greeting.

"Well, well! Good morning! And how is the invalid this morning? Better, I hope! Sleep well? The birds waked you, I expect. They greet each dawn as if it were the last—or the first!"

The room was a wide, low-ceilinged chamber, with a riot of faded pink roses clambering over the wall paper, and with venerable antique furnishings, of which a corded bedstead held the place of honor between the windows. As he talked, the little clergyman deposited his tray on a small table and drew it close to the bed, flinging a sharp glance at the bandaged face on the pillows as he did so—a glance half severe, half compassionate.

"Such a day, such day!" he went on. "You'll like these rolls. Mrs. Mills—my housekeeper—is famous for them—*and* for her coffee. Wait until you've sampled it. Think you can sit up? Here, let me help!"

Richard shook his head in protest, and dragged

himself up, while his host propped a pillow behind his head.

"You're very good," he said. "I'm sorry to have imposed on you like this."

"Impose—nonsense! How much sugar—two? Good! Just you taste this coffee. It'll set you up like nothing else."

Richard took the proffered cup, steadied it against his knee, and regarded the clergyman perplexedly from between his swollen lids. The little parson's face was drawn, his eyes were darkly ringed, but the fortitude and charity for which he had prayed through the long, silent hours of the night had been granted him.

The repugnance born of Richard's astounding confession the night before had left him—but not at once. He had found himself facing a condition that violated all the doctrines of his rigorous creed—a condition for which his orthodox principles offered no justification. Yet from his sacred book he had picked a verse that served him:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

He recalled it resolutely now as he looked at Richard, and at the bulky bandages which he himself had adjusted over his guest's ugly abrasions.

"That's right—drink your coffee. Good, isn't it?"

"Very," agreed Richard; "but I'm a little confused. It was last night I came here, wasn't it?"

"That's right—it was last night."

"And now—is it late in the day?"

"No, indeed, it is still early—not yet nine o'clock, in fact."

"And have you—has any word——"

Richard's voice hung there. The clergyman picked up the sentence.

"Have I heard anything from Peter, or from Dorcas? Is that what you want to know?"

"Yes."

"No—not yet. I don't expect to, come to think of it. They would scarcely think of coming to me."

Silence fell between them. Richard sipped his coffee. Mr. Beckwith, with a lively simulation of cheerful nonchalance, drew a chair to the side of the bed and sank into it.

"I see you appreciate Mrs. Mills' coffee! How about a roll now?"

Richard shook his head.

"You must have had a bad time with me last night," he said.

"No—oh, no! I've had many worse times, my friend. You're feeling better this morning?"

"Much, thanks."

"You slept?"

"Perhaps. I'm not quite certain. My thoughts were——"

"Thoughts are tantalizing things. I've often said that they're like fleas—busiest when you're the quietest."

Richard essayed a smile, set his cup on the table beside him, and sank back against his pillows.

"They were not pleasant, those thoughts, Mr. Beckwith!"

The clergyman's smiling lips pursed gravely.

"No, no—I suppose not. My own—well, they were not exactly gay."

"Gay? No, they wouldn't be that, would they?" mused Richard. "I'm sorry," he added.

The brevity of that last phrase sent a hot rush of color to Mr. Beckwith's face.

"Sorry!" he exploded. "Sorry! As if that helped! One would think you were expressing regret that your shaving water wasn't warm!" He bent forward impulsively. "Do you realize fully what this thing means to me—as an individual and as a clergyman?"

"Can you ask me?" returned Richard wearily.

"That's exactly what I am doing! The more I think of it, the more monstrous it seems! And to think that I——"

"To think that you shared Mr. Stayton's suspicions to the extent of marrying us without a license—is that what you were going to say?"

The unexpected accusation brought the minister to his feet with a bounce

"God knows I thought I was doing the right thing! After all, I am only human. I knew Pete Stayton—knew him to be a just person. The law in this State gives me a right to perform the marriage ceremony without a license if I consider that circumstances warrant it. Peter gave me every reason to believe that this was such an emergency. I was wrong!" The admission hung there for an instant before he turned on Richard in a volcanic outburst of indignation. "But you—man—you! What right have you to question me or my motives? Do you realize what you have done to that girl's life?"

"Yes," said Richard swiftly. "I realize it far more fully than you can; but my greatest regret is not yours. You're thinking only of the surface hurt

—of what I've done to her in the eyes of the world, if this becomes known. Isn't that so?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"It is nothing!" came the vehement answer. "I would still have everything to regret if you had never married us—if Peter had never suspected us. You and Peter have only added to our tragedy!"

The clergyman was frankly puzzled.

"And what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"I mean that fate had already trapped us before you and Peter got busy. Dorcas loves me——"

"Love!" broke in the minister. "You dare say it? You dare even think it?"

"I do! It is the only thing worth thinking of. That is the tragedy—the fact that we love each other. If we didn't, it would be simple—and no tragedy."

Mr. Beckwith fell to pacing the room with his short, nervous steps.

"Oh, come, come, this is asking too much of me! You are adding blasphemy to your other blunders!"

"What *you* are thinking—what Peter Stayton thought," expostulated Richard, "is blasphemy."

The clergyman came to a pause at the foot of the bed, his ruddy face blanched with anger.

"You—you say that? After——"

"Yes. I say it!" There was something terrifying in the wrath of that white face peering out of its heavy bandages. "You came up here this morning prepared to be magnanimous, to advise me and absolve me. I know you mean only to be kind and charitable; but I wouldn't have come here if I hadn't thought you to be understanding, as well."

"Man, man, I may be all those things—I hope I am—yet here I'm confronted with a monstrous situation—a man bound to one woman in the holy bonds

of matrimony, and protesting his love for another woman! I came up here prepared to find you contrite, amenable, and I find you contentious, defiant, boasting of emotions you have no right to feel. You have betrayed every law of decency!"

"No!" interrupted Richard swiftly. "The laws I have betrayed—if I have betrayed any—are those of my own conscience. I would never have betrayed the laws of men, if it had not been for Peter's suspicions and your credence of them."

"But you loved her before the wedding—you've told me so!"

"My one offense. God knows it was my only offense. I was going away—I had written her my farewell."

"But you submitted to that unlawful ceremony!"

"How could I do otherwise? In his mad frenzy Peter would have killed us both. We would have died a guilty pair in the eyes of the world. You must surely understand my motive! I had to live to see that Dorcas was vindicated." He laughed grimly. "Can't you see how much easier, how much simpler, it would have been for me to die than to have to live, knowing that we could never belong to each other? But I had unwittingly sullied her, in the eyes of your lewd-minded world. I had to live to see that her name was cleared."

"All this may be very true, and very beautiful and romantic," said the clergyman dryly; "but it is beside the point."

"It *is* the point!" Richard insisted obstinately. "You can't help us, as I know you want to do, unless you know, first—well, a doctor can't help his patient until he knows where the trouble lies. Dorcas loves me!" He breathed the words forth like a solemn

incantation. "She must know that I proved myself worthy of her love, that while I may have appeared to fail her, I was thinking only of her. She must know that I love her better than my life. You can't help her or comfort her, unless you can make her believe this!"

Mr. Beckwith looked steadily down at the white, bruised face against the pillows. The sturdy foundation of his religious structure was assailed by this heretical insurrection, which seemed to spring from something so profound, so tender, that his protests lost themselves in a maze of uneasy doubt.

"And are you commissioning me with these messages for Dorcas?" he inquired unsteadily.

Richard nodded.

"And do you know that this love you profess is a dishonorable one?"

"As you see it, yes," admitted Richard, and sank back against the pillows. "To me it is a holy and sacred thing. It has shrived me."

He closed his eyes to shut out the bright glare of the room, but the blithe music of birds and of children's voices came in at the open windows. He was conscious—as he had been the morning before, when he had stood with Dorcas on the tower balcony—of the chilly solitude of grief. It was as if all the vital forces of nature formed a conspiracy of indifference toward sorrow, as a self-protective measure.

When he opened his eyes, he found the grave eyes of Mr. Beckwith upon him.

"Then," the clergyman said gently, "supposing I accede to your request, supposing I withhold my own advice, have you a course of action planned?"

Richard nodded, his long forefinger tracing a pattern on the white counterpane.

"I am going back to town, of course; but, before I go, I must be sure that Dorcas will not leave her father and her home. I can't go away feeling that she is estranged from him through me. I can't think of her as homeless."

Mr. Beckwith said thoughtfully, and with something of the anxiety gone out of his face

"I think I can arrange things between Dorcas and her father. I'm glad that you seem to realize so clearly that it's best for you to go."

A slight smile curled the younger man's lips.

"To go!" he echoed. "I've known that I must go, ever since the moment that I knew I loved her. I should have gone two days ago, if it hadn't been for my hospitable host. Now"—he lifted his hand and let it fall—"it is still the only way I can serve her. I must live for her—and without her!"

The clergyman's eyes were misty. His fingers beat a nervous tattoo on the footboard of the bed as he stood there.

"She's waiting for me—in the tower," Richard said, after a moment. "I told her that I would come back—that she must wait; but you see I couldn't go back like this, and have her ask me how it happened. She mustn't know, of course, about that—about last night; but she *must* know that I stayed away for her sake."

"She shall, lad. And what shall I tell her—from you?"

Richard's eyes wandered to the window, to a ragged scroll of maple leaves against a blue patch of sky.

"That I love her, that her love is the most precious thing that has ever come into my life, and that all

my years shall be so many prayers for her happiness!"

The clergyman nodded gravely, his eyes on the protruding blue welt on Richard's cheek bone.

"I'll tell her," he promised.

"And, if you'll be so good, please call up my lawyer's office in New York and ask for Billings—Horace Billings. Tell him where I am, and ask him to get hold of my man and send my car out for me to-day. I shall appreciate it immensely."

Mr. Beckwith lifted his hands in protest.

"To-day! Surely you're not going to try to get away to-day? Not in this shape!"

"Oh, I'm equal to the trip," Richard assured him wearily. "The sooner I get away, the better."

"But to-day! My soul, man, give your wounds a chance to heal! I shouldn't be easy about you if I let you run off like this! As to getting away for her sake—no one knows you're here, and no one shall know it. This shall be your sanctuary. Come, stay until to-morrow, anyway!"

"Well, then, to-morrow," Richard acquiesced dully; "if you are sure that my presence here can be kept secret."

"Nothing surer," the clergyman assured him. "I'll speak to Mrs. Mills—she's discretion personified. And now, before I run down to see Peter Stayton, I'll put in that phone call—Billings, you say the name is?"

CHAPTER XXII

NEWS FROM ABROAD

LIFE'S a damned queer proposition, anyway, isn't it, Ches?"

Horace Billings fitted the telephone receiver into its hook and swung his chair about. His partner, standing near the window, nodded moodily.

"I suppose 'queer' is as good a word as any, if it accounts for Dick's calling at this particular moment—or whoever it was that did call."

"A clergyman," Billings explained.

"Didn't know Dick was very long on religion! Did you find out just what the trouble was?"

"With Dick? He wasn't precise—said something about an accident."

"Dick's laid up?"

"So it seems."

Chester Newell turned back to the window, to the insensate huddle of masonry spilled between the beetling office window and the frayed ribbon of the East River. A sultry mist of smoke and fog wrapped itself about the forked peaks of skyscrapers, and the ceaseless fret of traffic in the streets below came up like the rasp of a phonograph record before the tune begins.

"Queer!" he mused. "Not much of a word, but it'll do. First the cablegram from Paris—then an old boy up in the backwoods phoning in about Dick!"

"Not a quarter of an hour apart," supplemented

his partner gloomily, as he shook a cigarette out of its paper crypt. "I thought at first that the old boy—whoever he is—was going to tell me that Dick, too, was—well, nothing would have surprised me after that cable."

"Where is Dick, anyway?"

"Place called Standish, somewhere up on the Sound. First I've known where he was since he left town, except that I knew he hadn't gone with Della. And now——"

"I wonder"—the young lawyer's voice came thoughtfully from the window—"just how much he's going to care!"

"Dick—about Della? Do you need to wonder, Ches? He didn't go across with her, but apparently *somebody* did. No reason that I can see why *he* shouldn't have gone, except the obvious one—that he didn't want to!"

Chester Newell said musingly, after a moment:

"Of course, I've always—as they say in the movies—known that Dick's marriage hadn't been performed in the proper locality—heaven, I mean; but he's so darned decent, he never would make a subject for a comic strip."

"No, you can't tell much about Dick. He's like an old-fashioned watch—the kind with the closed case, that you broke your thumb-nail trying to open. When he left here, last spring, I wanted to brain him. 'See that my wife's allowance is deposited regularly,' he said. 'Hold my mail, or open it if it looks urgent. Do anything you like except try to find me.' 'Where the blazes are you going, anyway?' I asked him. He smiled—you know Dick's smile. 'I'm going off somewhere to check up,' he said. Cryptic, wasn't it?"

Sounded like an expert accountant. Then he gave me power of attorney, and skipped."

He turned back to his desk and reached for the telephone, while his partner started glumly for his own office.

"It's a good thing," Newell said, "that the preacher chap got his news off his chest before you had a chance to spring yours. You didn't give him a hint that anything was wrong here, did you?"

"Nary a hint," rejoined Billings, and spoke into the transmitter.

"Get me Richard Sells' house—Madison Avenue."

He replaced the receiver, and spoke over his shoulder to Newell.

"I'd have hated like the deuce to spring a thing like that over the phone anyway. It's all over—he can't help, and the body won't be here for at least a week. Plenty of time to break it to him when he gets back."

"Plenty of time, Heaven knows!" agreed Newell, and let himself into his own office.

"Now you just lie there and take things easy," Mr. Beckwith briskly advised Richard, bouncing back into the room. Something of his old cheerful pomposity had returned, as if to combat the alien gloom that had threatened his sturdy optimism. "I got Mr. Billings on the phone, and everything's all right—quite all right. He expressed his sympathy and sent his greetings. He'll have your man and your car down here to-morrow."

Richard turned his head on the pillow and summoned the smile that the little clergyman had hoped for.

"Thanks! It's good of you to take so much trou-

ble. They had nothing of importance to report, I suppose?"

"Nothing whatever, boy. And now, if you're comfortable, I'll drop down to Peter Stayton's and see if I can drive a little sense into his obstinate skull. You'll feel better when that is straightened out, I know. I feel sure that I shall have comforting news for you when I get back."

He hurried toward the door and opened it on the plump little housekeeper, whose hand had been lifted to knock.

"Well, well, Mrs. Mills! You've come for the tray, I suppose."

"There's a caller for you, doctor," she announced, with a compassionate glance toward the bed. "She's waiting down in the parlor. She asked me to tell you that she was in a great hurry. It's Cap'n Stayton's daughter, Dorcas."

The name filled the room like a vibrant tone as the housekeeper moved toward the small table, set the empty coffee cup on the tray, and folded the napkin.

Save for the blue welts beneath the wounded man's eyes, face and bandages and pillows had merged into a blur of white. Mr. Beckwith crossed slowly to the bed.

"She has come here, you see!"

Richard's hands were clawing at the counterpane.

"Here!" he whispered. "She has come here! She knows, then, that I'm here!"

"That doesn't follow," the clergyman said thoughtfully. "I don't see how she could know it. It's scarcely possible."

"And if—if she asks?"

"God forbid that! But if she does ask, I shall rely upon her to show something of your own courage."

He walked to the window, his hands twisting behind his back. "This is very terrible—very terrible!"

"Here—so close!" murmured Richard.

It brought the minister back to the bed, a latent apprehension in his eyes.

"My dear man, I know it is hard, but"—he spoke harshly—"if you weaken, if you make your presence here known, I shall have to withdraw from this whole affair. I shall have to make the fact of your bigamy known, and take my own share of the consequences. Keep that in mind, and remember what it would do to her!"

Richard's white lips pinched together. He closed his eyes.

"You may trust me. She must believe that I have already gone."

"Good!"

The minister started resolutely toward the door.

"Wait! Will you leave it open a little, so that I—I can hear her voice?"

The entreaty hung for a moment in the heavy silence.

"I put you on your honor, boy," the clergyman said, and went out, leaving the door ajar.

CHAPTER XXIII

LOVE'S SACRIFICE

MR. BECKWITH'S parlor had the stiff, prim look of having only just emerged from the capable ministrations of his plump housekeeper Dorcas sat on a straight-backed chair, her face very pale, her gloves twisted into a string in her nervously moving fingers. She did not move when the clergyman came into the room, but her eyes fastened eagerly on his.

He assumed his breeziest manner as he hurried across the room to her, with both hands outstretched.

"Well, well, Dorcas, my dear! I'm highly honored! And how are you this beautiful day?"

He drew a chair close to her own, while the significance of the dark frock and hat, and of the bulky suit case beside her, added a new terror to those he already faced. He covered her hands with his own and patted them gently.

"Now we're all comfortable, and I haven't seen you smile yet! Come, come, a little smile isn't going to incriminate you!"

She dropped her eyes and said, with the meticulous care of a child reciting a well-learned lesson:

"Mr. Beckwith, I'm going away. I wanted to tell you, because——"

"Because"—he took the word from her eagerly—"because you would naturally tell me, as your friend and as your mother's friend—because you are so sure of my disinterested love for you—isn't that it?"

"Yes," she acquiesced gravely; "because of those things, and because you married Richard and me, and because you liked him——"

"Who wouldn't?" broke in the clergyman heartily. It brought a fleeting glow to her eyes. "But, my dear child," he hurried on, "you say you are going away! Now that's no sort of an announcement to make to *me*! I want to know why, and where, and for how long—all about it, in fact."

He placed her palms together and held them in his own warm clasp. She looked up at him and shook her head doubtfully.

"I think you already know the answer to all those questions." As he made a sharp exclamation of denial, she added: "You haven't asked me about Richard."

He thumped his knee mightily.

"To be sure I haven't! Just shows what a blundering old idiot I am. Well——"

"Oh, you don't need to do that," she broke in quickly. "I know, Mr. Beckwith, I know! I know that you know—something!"

His face sobered. Free of the necessity to dissemble, he found a certain relief in that tragic avowal.

"And how, Dorcas, child, did you know that I knew something?"

"I'm a woman," she told him simply. "Your eyes told me when you first came into the room." Then she leaned forward, her young face suddenly old. "Tell me what has happened to him! Where is he?"

He left her there and went over to the window, bereft of words, surprised to find that the props which had served him for so long, which had sus-

tained him in so many emergencies, had failed him now. What was there in his beatific repertoire of words that he could say to this stricken girl, whose grief had sprung from such a maze of fatal circumstances? It was as difficult to comfort her, he reflected dismally, as to trace the grim trail that had led to her present unhappiness.

He went back to her, after a moment, with the consoling thought that at least she did not know that Richard was there—in his house.

"My dear child, you are right. I do know—about you and Richard."

"I'm glad of that," she said. "And if you know that, won't you tell me where he is now?"

The clergyman shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry to hear you ask that question, Dorcas."

"Because you won't tell me. You're sorry, because you feel that you can't tell me—is that it?"

"Not entirely." He spoke gently. "I'm sorry you asked me, because it isn't what I had hoped from you, because you——"

"Because you think I have no right to ask—because you think I'm wicked in wanting to know where he is!" She got up quickly, her eyes hard and bright. "That's what you think, isn't it? You think I should remember that I have no right to—to anything concerning him. Well, you're wrong! I'm going!"

For a moment he was too much astonished by her sudden outburst to do more than stare stupidly at her. Then he sprang after her, and took the suit case, which she had picked up, out of her hand.

"Going? You're going to do nothing of the kind! My dear child, you've put words in my mouth that weren't there! Come, now—you wouldn't treat me like this! You came to me as a friend, and you are

treating me like an enemy." She shook her head slowly. "Ah, but you are!"

"I only came," she said dully, "because I thought that perhaps Richard might have come to you. Now that I see he isn't here, there's nothing else for me to stay for." Her lips curled in a cynical smile. "I didn't come for sympathy or advice."

In the white, bitter face, in the twitching lips, in the disillusionment of her young eyes, he found no resemblance to the child who had made her marriage vows so valiantly forty-eight hours before. A panic seized him.

"But you can't unmake a friendship in that high-and-mighty manner, my dear! You can't run away like this!"

She challenged him abruptly.

"Will you tell me about him?"

"As much as I can, child—as much as I can!" he promised frantically. "Sit down again, dear, sit down!"

She obeyed quietly, but still her eyes and lips were cynical.

"You will tell me just as much as you think good for me," she said.

"And for *him*," he added gravely.

"Oh, no!" she said. "That won't be necessary. How do you know what is good for him?"

He drew up his hands in a gesture of dismay, of thwarted intention.

"Come, now, you're making it very hard for me—and I am so anxious to help."

"Help?" she echoed.

"Exactly," he said, patting her arm. "Here you are in a terrible position. You have been made wretched through no fault of your own. Oh, I *know*

that! And don't think I blame you; but don't you see how much worse this thing might have been?"

"You're going to tell me about the silver lining," she said harshly.

"Precisely," he agreed. "You're in a dark cloud, I know—darker than most; but you must try to find the silver lining. It's there."

"Yes?" she helped him coldly. "Yes?"

"For example, I have as yet filed no record of this marriage. No one knows that it took place. There's a ray of light for you! Richard was a fine young man—partly at fault, no doubt, but honorable and very fine. If he had been otherwise, it would have been a sad story indeed!" He paused for a moment, trying to look the optimism he was simulating, yet appalled at the empty sound of the words. "There is a certain beauty, the beauty of sacrifice and tenderness, that robs this affair of much of its apparent evil."

"I see!" she said dispassionately. "And is that all you have to tell me?"

He laid a supplicating hand over hers.

"My dear, you mustn't speak like that! Is that all? No! The point is, are you going to rob this thing of its better side? Are you going to let it make you bitter?"

"Bitter!" she repeated reflectively. "It has made me wiser."

His spirits lifted at the quiescent tone.

"Of course it has; and I'm glad you came to me, though I was coming down to have a talk with you—to tell you that I knew all about it from Richard's own lips."

"But you didn't come to tell me where he had gone, or how badly he had been hurt—physically!"

His eyes narrowed.

"Physically, my dear?"

"Oh!" she said, with a weary shrug. "I know that father struck him. I don't see why you should pretend ignorance."

"My dear little girl, I'm sorry—sorry that you had to know that!"

"It was—just something else," she said.

In his nervous quest for words, he went back to the window, and stood looking wretchedly out on the quiet street with its protective canopy of maples. Her voice followed him, muffled, half inaudible.

"Was he hurt badly?"

He swung about and back to her side again.

"Hurt, yes, but not so badly that he won't be all right presently."

She was twisting her gloves again in an agony of suppressed eagerness.

"And you saw him? He came to you, instead of to me? I waited for him—waited all night!"

"He only came to me, Dorcas, because he saw how futile it would be for him to go back to you. He wanted to spare you any more suffering. He did the right thing in coming to me, and he bequeathed me the precious burden he had no right to assume. It was a fine sacrifice on his part, my dear."

"Yes!" She had lapsed again into her languid apathy. "Yes, I expect it was fine, as you call it." Once more she got up and stooped for her suit case. "Well, then, I'm going."

"Oh, no—not like this!" He caught her arm. "You're not going to run off when there's so much still unsaid!"

"But I don't want to hear any more. I'm going."

"Well, then"—he was working desperately against time—"wait, and I'll take you home."

She smiled wanly.

"You know I'm not going home, Mr. Beckwith."

"Pooh, pooh! I know you *are*. You haven't heard me out yet. There's Richard's message——"

"Message?" she repeated, and again more shrilly: "Message? For me?"

"For whom else?"

"Then tell me, tell me what it is!"

He wagged his finger at her.

"I'll reserve it until we get home."

"But I've told you I'm not going home!"

"Then where are you going?"

She faced him steadily, the suit case still dragging from her slender fingers, her face as devoid of color as of emotion.

"I'm going to Richard," she said quietly.

He stared blankly at her, his brows puckered like a puzzled child's, his head tilted slightly sidewise. In that moment he was aware of an overwhelming weakness, and sent up a swift, desperate prayer for help. Gently he laid his hand on her arm.

"Dorcas, Dorcas, my dear, you can't know what you're saying!"

She looked down at his restraining fingers with a sort of detached interest.

"Ah, but I do, and I mean what I say. I'm going to Richard—to belong to him."

In his extremity Mr. Beckwith resorted to strategy.

"Well, then, suppose you tell me why you've made this decision! You must remember that I am your friend. I was your mother's friend. It's due me to know a little more of this, don't you think? You

see"—he smiled appealingly into the girl's eyes—"I'm putting it on the basis of friendship."

As he talked, he was drawing her gently back to her chair. She sank into it with a troubled little sigh.

"That's right! You wouldn't run away like that from me, without telling me more about it!"

"But what do you want me to say?"

"Say!" He wagged his head incredulously. "Say! After making an announcement like that!"

"I suppose it sounds very wicked, to you."

His energetic gasp denied this.

"I'm just interested to know why you've made up your mind to do it, when you know——"

"That Richard is married—to some one else?" She folded her hands in her lap and studied her fingers thoughtfully. "Well, then, I'm going because I love him, because we were meant to belong to each other, and because he needs me."

The little clergyman's years, so successfully held at bay by his hardy buoyancy, overpowered him now. He seemed very old and gray.

"But, dear girl, though all this may be quite true, are these sufficient reasons for you to make yourself an outcast?"

"Yes," she said evenly. "You see, I'm already an outcast in father's eyes. I should be in every one's, if people knew about this. Father called me a wanton." The clergyman covered his eyes with a shaking hand, but she went on drearily "Do you think I would stay in his house after that?"

"But, Dorcas, you must make allowances. He didn't understand. He is your father——"

"No!"

"Your father," Mr. Beckwith persisted. "His love

for you distorted his vision. Then, too, you must consider his age. Youth must be generous to age. Your father was half mad with grief."

"Perhaps," she agreed readily enough; "but I would rather die than go back. I'm going to Richard!"

The dispassionate finality of her tone chilled him. He searched feverishly for a word, a phrase, that might move her.

"And do you realize fully what you are doing? Have you thought of the consequences? You are going to live—as his wife, I gather—with a married man. You know what Jesus said of that?"

"Yes," she said, "I know."

"And you are quite prepared to break that law?"

"Law!" she cried harshly. "Do you think your talk of laws can impress me—now? My own father has just shown me how little they mean—these laws of yours. *He* didn't hesitate to break them. Why should I? There's a law that reads, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged!'" Her voice lifted triumphantly. "Well, father judged me, without a hearing. After he had forced Richard to marry me, in order to make me pure according to his standards, he advised me to break my marriage vows—to desert the man he thought was my lawful husband. That's how much he respected your laws!"

She stopped to challenge him, her cheeks crimson, her eyes hard, her mouth set mutinously.

"Oh, no, your laws can't frighten me now!" she went on. "They are so many hypocrisies—made to be broken when it suits our convenience. My father broke those that suited him—I shall break those that suit me!"

He broke in desperately:

"But, Dorcas, it is not so simple as that! The fact that your father erred is no reason why you should."

"Oh, but it is!" she declared vehemently. "He showed me what sort of things these laws were—how mean and lewd and petty. He broke the laws of God in deference to the laws of man. You may smile, but you see I've thought it all out. When I go to Richard, I only break the laws of man, for I know that our love is sacred. I didn't *will* to love Richard—it just came into my heart. Who put it there?" She was like a jubilant child, exulting in some new-found prowess. "I would have given Richard up gladly, you see; but why should I sacrifice our happiness to uphold laws that are so mean? My father is a Christian, but he has acted like a beast!"

The youth of her, her hot rebellion against the incomprehensible enginery of life, tore at Mr. Beckwith's heart. He could see her through those dark hours while she waited for Richard, wandering through the bleak labyrinth of inconsistencies into which this experience had thrown her. And how was she to find her way bereft of faith—without the philosophic torch of life?

How combat the forces of her newborn skepticism, save with the only weapons she did not scorn? His pulses were beating hard, but he nodded thoughtfully, as if considering the things she had said.

"I see the way you feel. I might have known you wouldn't make such a decision without excellent reasons." He bent forward and laid his hand over hers. "But you've thought of Richard, too, of course?"

"Of Richard!" she echoed sharply. "Of course—of Richard, first of all!"

"Then of course you have considered what this will mean to him?"

"He needs me," she said hotly. "I shall take care of him and make him happy!"

"Not if I know Richard," he said, not ungently.

Her eyes were startled and resentful.

"But *I* know him!"

"You know, then, that he is as sensitive as he is loyal—his life proves how loyal. He has been loyal to his marriage vows all these years, when they have brought him nothing but unhappiness. He was so loyal to his love for you that from the first he gave you up. His message to you is significant of him."

"His message!"

Mr. Beckwith nodded, ignoring her swift eagerness.

"He said that I was to tell you that he loved you, that all his years would be so many prayers for your happiness."

The light that came into her eyes dazzled him, but he continued evenly:

"You see, from the first, Richard has known that he could not claim you. Still, he was fine enough to be willing to give you up. He told himself that he had found and loved a pure woman who had loved him. It gave him a staff that would have served him all his life. Having to make the sacrifice made him strong, but now——"

He stopped there, hoping for some response from her, but she was very still.

"You know, I suppose, the effect your decision will have on him. You will go to him and say, 'We love each other—let us belong to each other! Let us defy all the laws of God and man, for these laws are not

so strong or so good as our love!' And his love for you will have made him vulnerable. He will be convinced—for a little while. Then, presently, the world *will* hear of it, and the beauty of your love will be spoiled and ruined by scandal."

"Do you think that matters to me?" she said defiantly.

"No," he admitted thoughtfully; "but perhaps Richard's faith is stronger than yours. Perhaps he believes that whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committed adultery against her."

The hot color rushed into her cheeks, but he went on, still without heat, as if he were ruminating aloud to himself:

"You will have burdened Richard with that sin. A man of lesser principles might not consider it a burden, but Richard wouldn't so readily have given you up if he had not believed it wrong to keep you. All his life he will know that he dragged you down from the high place his love made for you. He will know that he has made you a target for the scandal-mongers, a corespondent in a sordid divorce action. Of course, you won't care, but it seems pretty clear to me that Richard does not share your—er—courageous viewpoint. I'm afraid that instead of his love for you being the beautiful and spiritual memory that it is now, it will soon have become a very earthly reality—just another dead ideal."

He sighed resignedly, still uncertain of the effect his words were having upon her, for her head was bent, her eyes were on her clasped hands in her lap.

"But of course you have considered all these things. You are willing that he should pay the price, since you are so certain that *you* will not."

Somewhere in the house a clock struck hollowly. A sprinkling of perspiration beaded the little parson's forehead. At last the girl spoke without lifting her eyes.

"You're trying to tell me that he will only learn to hate me!" Then, with a rasping cry: "Oh, life is terrible—terrible! Why did this have to happen to me? What shall I do?"

The cry brought him to his feet and close beside her. He drew her head against him and cuddled it in his arms, while his heart beat out a pæan of gratitude.

"Do, my child! Hasn't the man you love pointed the way? Let this experience of yours be your torch too. Keep it lit with the purity of your heart and soul, and you will never learn to hate it. If you have lost your faith in everything else, you still have faith in him; and he has left you in my charge."

"But what shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?"

He saw the great wet drops gather one by one on her locked hands, and knew that at last she was crying.

"Dorcas, dear, you know what is best for you to do. You must let me take you home."

"Home?" She bounded from her chair and faced him, with her cheeks glistening, though her eyes were suddenly dry and wild. "Home, after what my father has done to me? Do you think I would?"

"I'm sure you will. It was Richard's wish."

"No, no—I can't! I hate my father! I told him I never wanted to see him again, and I meant it. I hate him!"

"But you'll go back because it is what Richard wanted."

"No, no!"

"Ah!" said the clergyman sadly. "Pride, my dear! I thought you were too brave for that."

She was sobbing again now, warding him away from her with outflung arms, as if she feared he would move her by force.

"I tell you I hate my father!"

"You will love him as you never loved him, Dorcas," he told her gently. She shook her head incredulously. "You've never had to forgive him before, and you will love him in proportion to the amount you forgive. You remember who said, 'To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.'"

He took possession of her hands once more, and she clung to him, stripped of her resistance, sensible of her inability to cope with the inscrutable paradoxes of fate. As he soothed her, Mr. Beckwith's thoughts flew to Richard, who had pleaded to hear her voice, and, hearing it, had found the courage to withstand its appeal. The clergyman made a silent obeisance.

"You must let me take charge now," he said resolutely. "I am going to take you home, and I am going to settle things between you and your father, my dear. Come along!"

She stopped for a moment at the foot of the stairs, while she dabbed at her eyes with a wet handkerchief. Upstairs, Richard, his clothes flung hastily on, slunk away from his open door and sank on his knees beside the corded bed.

Between him and the girl he loved there lay a short flight of stairs, down which crawled a strip of gay carpet—"hit-and-miss" carpet, Mrs. Mills had assured the minister, was its proper title. If there was a grim symbolism in this, there was none there to descry it—save, perhaps, that inimitable practical joker, Fate.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TIME OF DEATH

PERHAPS Henri Deffand would have approved of that same practical joker's impartial methods if he had been sounded on the subject. He might have observed with a shrug—for he was something of a philosopher—that it was indeed an ill wind that blew no one any good.

Instead of a seat in a third-class carriage of the capricious *chemin de fer* linking that remote corner of Brittany with the French metropolis, Henri rode into town like some official potentate in the tonneau of a smart and fabulously expensive limousine. True, the limousine was not Henri's, but the hauteur he borrowed from its grandeur might have deceived the casual observer, and the aroma of the fine cigar between his lips enhanced his air of importance.

When the car came to a pause outside the *maire*, Henri was the first to descend, elaborately unconscious of the gaping mouths and lifted brows in his vicinity, elaborately condescending to the well-tailored young man who followed him. The *maire*, who had been peeping through the closed blinds of one parlor window while his wife utilized the other for the same purpose, went hurriedly to the door, pulling his vest into place as he went.

"I'm back, you see," announced Henri largely. "This is Monsieur Gray, who has come from the American consul."

A splendid ceremony of introduction followed, but the American clipped short the suave preliminaries that threatened to keep him away from Paris for a longer period than was convenient.

"I've come to verify the facts with which Monsieur Deffand was good enough to acquaint us," he announced pleasantly.

The *maire* bowed solemnly, in deference to the tragic implication of the words.

"Ah, my friend, it was very sad!"

"Very," agreed the American briskly. "We have succeeded in identifying the unfortunate lady who——"

"It was no simple matter," broke in Henri, slightly injured that the announcement had been taken from him.

"It was a matter of tact and resource," the visitor agreed, and smiled upon the disgruntled emissary. "Monsieur Deffand possesses both of these qualities, fortunately. He discovered that the lady's name was Mrs. Sells, but her companion remains unidentified as yet."

"We thought—my wife thought—that he might have been her husband," offered the *maire* hopefully.

"No—she was traveling alone." The *maire* sighed at that, and Henri's brows lifted. "I'd like to get a glimpse of the car, and to have a word with the doctor and with any one else who knows anything about the affair. I should like to have a few more details, you see."

"You've only to find Jules Kermadec," the *maire* told him. "He will be on the beach at this hour, doubtless. If you'll just come with me——"

Their progress through the narrow street was in the nature of a cumulative procession. The venerable

gendarme, still mildly indignant that an affair of such violence should have occurred in his vicinage, joined them and protested plaintively:

"The way is clearly marked, monsieur. Me, I am unable to comprehend how it was they failed to see the signboard."

"Going sixty and drunk, probably," muttered the American.

The little doctor, who was sipping a glass of *vin ordinaire*, cautiously watered, before the Café of the Small Turtle, contributed his meager addition to the evidence, and joined the procession. It was his opinion, he said, that the sun had blinded the man at the wheel.

"The sun was in the act of setting, monsieur, and they were directly facing it, you understand."

On the beach, Jules, who had been duly warned of the approaching cortège by his loyal partisans, was beautifully unconscious of its approach until the procession was fairly upon him. He bore the introduction with a good deal of reserve, and stertorously announced, at the end of it, that he, Jules Kermadec, had been the only eye witness of the tragic affair.

"Alas, monsieur!" he said, and the pupils of his eyes disappeared beneath the lids as he spoke. "I saw the whole thing. It was very terrible! Like a blue comet out of the heavens it came!"

"Ahem! Yes—do you recall the time, by any chance?"

Interrupted in his eloquence, Jules regarded the American reproachfully.

"And do you think I could forget?" he demanded. "I had just beached my boat. It had been a poor day. The devils of fish——"

"Yes, but the time?"

"As I was in the act of telling you, it was sunset."

"Precisely!" supplemented the doctor, and was promptly frowned upon by the fisherman.

"They came over the cliff. You shall see the exact spot, my friend. I saw at once they were doomed, though I cried out in warning. I shouted, I waved my arms——"

"You say you shouted?"

It was Henri Deffand who put the question. Jules whirled on him.

"But yes, as I am telling you. When the car fell"—he was addressing the American now—"I ran to it, and——"

"Ah, that is strange, my friend!" interrupted Henri gently. "My impression was that you ran *away*, still shouting——"

"For help," Jules finished severely. "Eager as I was to go to the assistance of the unfortunates, I recognized that I should be powerless to help. I ran, calling for the doctor."

They had walked along the beach to where the broken swells lipped at the half-buried wreckage of the car. Here they paused, while the visitor lit a cigarette and made his inspection.

"Hm, yes!" He was making notes with a slender gold pencil. "The car is done for. It must have come over those cliffs with a rush! There was no luggage of any sort?"

"The car was empty, save for the bodies," the doctor said.

"The road is clearly marked," the gendarme protested plaintively.

"Ah, but it is as I said—they were not looking at the *road*!"

Henri Deffand, who spoke, winked knowingly at the American.

"It is *my* opinion," Jules observed hardily, "that the man was already dead at the wheel."

"The cost of removing the *débris* will be high, monsieur," the *maire* suggested timidly. "The bodies are even now harbored in my house, where we took the liberty of offering prayers for their departed souls. The priest's fee——"

"We will attend to all these things," the American soothed him, and drew out a wallet. "Madame's husband is not poor, and I am convinced that he would not want these little kindnesses of yours to go unrewarded."

The *maire* made a feeble protesting gesture of hands and shoulders, while Henri threw a furtive glance at the richly packed wallet. Jules was moving his lips piously.

"For your trouble, messieurs—ah, but you must accept it in the name of the poor dead woman you befriended."

They took the bank notes from him—Henri with the grand manner of one receiving his just dues, the gendarme with a plaintive sigh, Jules reluctantly. A scattered audience along the top of the dunes watched the performance with unconcealed delight. The proprietor of the Café of the Small Turtle, who was among them, hurried off to clear his cluttered tables and refill his jugs.

The young American, whose thoughts had been peregrinating between his gloomy mission and a bright face in a certain studio on the Boulevard Raspail, looked at his watch.

"I'll take a look at the bodies, if you don't mind, and make arrangements for their removal. The

Touraine sails from Havre on Saturday, and perhaps we can get them aboard her."

If the clink of the convivial glasses and the chink of new silver money in the Café of the Small Turtle, that evening, was suggestive of a fête day, it was perhaps the most fitting tribute that the Breton village could have paid to Della Sells.

CHAPTER XXV

ILLCIT EXPLORATIONS

WHEN he saw that Dorcas had indeed gone, Peter Stayton stumbled back into the kitchen and sat down before the stripped table, his eyes on the murky residue of coffee in the girl's half-emptied cup.

The sea, still in the throes of reaction from the tempest, lay blue and demure, so that an odd quietude overhung the marsh meadows. The little black boy who, squatting in his swing, formed the pendulum of the clock on the mantel, seemed to realize that in all the silence, save for his activity, there was no evidence of the march of minutes. He seemed to put even more than his customary energy into his blithe task of beating the rhythm for that mute parade.

It seemed to Peter that he himself hung suspended in some vague interspace, where there was only the hot beat of drums in his ears and against his burning temples. Even the memory of that slender, dark-clad figure trudging up the road away from him failed to move him, so remote had it become. He was conscious of a tragic solitude that seemed to be pressing in upon him and smothering him.

When a step on the gravel path aroused him, he lifted his head, and for a long moment there was no recognition in his eyes as they rested on the figure of Rose Ruby. She stood just inside the door, re-

garding him half timidly, so that her smile was uncertain.

"How be ye this morning? Thought I'd come over to see if ye wanted anything done."

He pushed the cup away with the lazy nonchalance of a man just finishing his breakfast, and swaggered across to her, fearful that she would notice his unsteady gait.

"Oh, it's *you*! Do I want anything done? Sure!" He was elaborately casual. "Sure! Come in an' get busy."

She peered eagerly about the room.

"They gone?" she whispered hoarsely.

"Gone! Who? Oh, them!" He laughed shortly. "Yes, they've gone. About time, I'd say. This ain't much of a place fer a honeymoon, is it now?"

She shook her head until her hair strung down over her eyes.

"Give *me* Coney Island," she said devoutly, and then, with a note of awe in her voice: "Mebbe that's where they went!"

Peter knew, then, that he must get away from the sound of her voice, the piercing light of her little, bright eyes, which seemed to pry clean through a man's body and soul, and the sight of her rusty skirt flapping about her wrinkled shoe tops. How could a man think with a witch cackling in his ears? He had an impulse to shake her, and wondered, if he did so, whether she wouldn't fall apart like an ill-made puppet.

"I'm goin' out in the skiff," he told her, without turning his head. "I'll be back fer dinner."

He started off across the lawn.

She watched him go with a muttered imprecation

against his unsociable conduct. Then she turned back to her work, humming a cracked tune.

When she had laid a fire in the stove, ready for lighting, she went upstairs, armed with cleaning paraphernalia. She reached the landing outside the tower room, panting from the climb. Here she stood staring into the room, while her eyes widened with astonishment. She had expected to find the room quite empty, but she found, instead, a neat stack of hand luggage piled about an upended trunk in the center of the floor.

She was thrilled by this tangible evidence of the romance in which she had played such an important part. True, the fact that the bridal couple had left without luggage was an affront to her ideas of a romance; but as she went in she sniffed the odor of new leather that clung to the bags as if it were some magic perfume.

She propped her broom and mop against the wall, and stood delightedly over the heaped luggage. A few ragged labels clung to the sides of the trunk and suit case. After spelling them out laboriously, she concluded that they were foreign. She rubbed her hands together with pleased excitement. Evidently the city man had been abroad. Unbelievable thought!

A brief case stood propped against the trunk. She stooped and picked it up, running her rough fingers over the smooth cowhide surface. Its shape was new to her, and she dimly wondered to what use such an odd bit of luggage might be put.

With a furtive glance toward the door, she unbuckled the straps, loosed the clasp, and peered in. Papers—neat little expensive-looking books with leather covers!

Rose Ruby had nourished her starved and avid af-

fections too long on the emotional overflow of others to be hampered now by any finical scruples. Her ghoulish tendencies had been augmented by a long dearth of adventure in the village. It was with a sharp sucking in of breath that she peered in at the unexplored treasures of the brief case, before she began picking them out one by one and spreading them on her lap—envelopes, papers, letters—all typed and, as a consequence, easy to read:

DEAR SIR:—The bond issue of the——

These she discarded. Romance did not express itself in such terms, according to Rose Ruby.

A flat, red check book proved richer fare. There were figures here that spelled fabulous amounts, and gave her the same illicit thrill that she felt when a richly gowned movie star made her dazzling appearance upon the screen. The records opposite the figures opened a veritable Ali Baba's cave to her.

Club dues, taxes, repairs on car—so he had a car, eh? Well, Dorcas *had* set herself in a butter tub! Servants, chauffeur—Rose Ruby was athrill now. Flowers—she sniffed at the word Forty dollars for flowers! Well, what had she told Pete about these city men and women?

She flipped over another page, and hung breathlessly above the next entry:

Deposited to Della's account.

Della! Rose Ruby's withered cheeks were showing crimson spots. A thousand dollars to Della! She fairly rushed through the pages now, and found the same entry again.

When she had plumbed the rich depths of the check book's revelations, there were little trickles of saliva at the corners of her mouth. She delved back into the bag. She was seeing the imaginary Della as a dark and fascinating Jezebel in all the glint and glitter of illicit jewels and guilty splendor.

There were more letters, as vague of meaning as they were clear of text. Out of one of these, as if it had been slipped in carelessly, dropped a heavy, white envelope, distinguished from its fellows by the fact that its address was scrawled in longhand. She spelled the address out arduously—"Mr. and Mrs. Richard Sells, Madison Avenue, New York."

Once, twice, three times she read it, while her hands shook and her breath came raspingly. Then she slipped out the sheet of paper inside, and found it to be a wedding invitation, neatly engraved, and with that same incriminating script filling in the blank reserved for the guest's name.

Rose Ruby was in a frenzy now—a frenzy that hampered her as she crammed the papers back into the bag—the frenzy of one who, anticipating a spare meal of crumbs, had found a feast awaiting her. She was cunning enough, even in her eagerness, to replace the papers and books as she had found them—all save the square white envelope, which she thrust into the fusty bosom of her dress. Then she stumbled down the stairs, panting and gasping for breath, snatched her shawl from its hook, and hurried across the lawn toward the beach.

CHAPTER XXVI

MIDDAY VIGIL

THE clergyman stopped his car before the big, white house, hopped briskly out, and smiled encouragingly up at the girl.

"Come along, sister—there's a brave girl! Hold up your little head—you've reason enough! Now, what did you pack in this bag, anyway—firearms or gold bricks?"

Their progress up the path was enlivened by his pleasantries, though in the bright sunlight his face looked very gray and haggard, and his shoulders sagged wearily.

"You must let me have a little time alone with your dad, my dear. After that, everything is going to be all right—I'll guarantee it!"

They found the kitchen cool and dim after the bright glare outside, and permeated with the faint odor of yellow soap and moist wood. Mr. Beckwith looked about anxiously. The lethargy that had wrapped the girl since she had succumbed to his pleading seemed to have left her devoid of volition. She was like an automaton, moving only in response to his voice.

"Nobody home, I'm afraid," he said. "Sit down, child, while I take a peep around."

He went outdoors, peered into the garden, and strode across the lawn to the idle *Dorcas*. Then he came back to the porch and raised his voice.

"Ahoy, Peter!"

After repeating the summons, he went back to the kitchen—to the girl sitting listlessly beside the table.

"Looks as if the ship had been abandoned," he said, with an attempt to be jocular. "That's a nice how-d'ye-do!"

For a moment he paced the kitchen nervously, angered that his plans had been balked, troubled by the thought of Richard, who must have heard something—if not all, indeed—of that tragic controversy in his house, and who might forget his promise and follow Dorcas.

The clergyman was distressed, too, by the girl's utter exhaustion. Her white face and heavy eyes drew him to her side, and he patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"Come, come—brace up! How about going upstairs for a little rest, while I wait for your father? If I know anything about eyes, yours haven't been closed for a couple of nights!"

She shook her head weakly.

"Now, don't wag that head at me!" he warned her. "What you need is sleep. Come along, just to please me—there's a good child!"

He drew her to her feet, and they went up the stairs hand in hand. When they had reached the first landing, he turned toward the door of her room, but she went on. He followed, with a compassionate light in his eyes. At the door of the tower room, her lips lifted in a wan smile.

"I feel closer to him here," she said.

"So you do—and why not?" he rejoined heartily, and followed her inside.

She pointed to the neat stack of luggage.

"His things," she said.

Mr. Beckwith nodded, led her to the couch, and lifted off her hat.

"Now you just lie down there and let me sit beside you, as I used to do sometimes when you were a youngster. You're still *my* little youngster, you know! That's right! All comfortable?"

He patted her hand. She lay staring up at the ceiling, so colorless, so drained of her buoyancy and spirit, that the little parson's throat contracted as he looked down at her.

An enveloping silence settled down on the little room—the murmurous silence of an August morning, with its echoes of bird and insect activity, of droning voices blurred by distance.

The clergyman's eyes had wandered to the open window. When they came back to Dorcas, her eyes were closed, and her lashes were lying darkly against her white cheeks. A profound sigh voiced his relief. She had succumbed at last to nature's best soporific—exhaustion. All traces of her harrowing grief seemed to have been washed away. So untroubled and peaceful did she look that she might have been a child sung lovingly to sleep by a mother's lullaby.

He lingered for some moments before he left her, closing the door softly and tiptoeing down the stairs. He told himself that, once asleep, she would doubtless pay nature's full toll for those hideous nights, and would sleep for many hours.

Downstairs again, he paced back and forth in the big kitchen, pausing now and then to glance out across the lawn toward the beach. The thought of Richard recurred to trouble him, and multitudinous neglected tasks weighed on his mind. Where was Peter? How long would Richard wait? How de-

pendable was his endurance? How much had he heard of the girl's heart-rending words?

At last, driven to a panic of nervous anxiety, he climbed the tower stairs again, and looked in at the sleeping girl who did not stir at the sound of his steps. Then he hurried down and out of the back door.

If Peter Stayton was fishing or lobstering, it was unlikely that he would return before noon—as unlikely as that the girl would wake. The clergyman could get to Richard and back again, he told himself, as he strode down the path, before either of these things could happen. He climbed into his little car and swung it around toward the village.

A dozen times he had glanced toward the beach, a dozen times his eyes had passed over the wavering fringes of the stone jetty, but the black dot that was Rose Ruby was so still and merged so imperceptibly into the rocks about her, that she had formed only a part of the inanimate view. Patience, born of the rich significance of her discovery, sustained her in her tireless vigil. The climbing sun scorched her wizened face and struck through her wispy hair to prick her scalp with myriad hot-pointed needles, but she was insensible to everything save the leaping expectancy within her.

When she finally caught sight of Peter's skiff, she stood up and waved her scrawny arm frantically, long before he could have distinguished her figure. As he drew closer, her signals became still more frantic. The breeze caught her shawl and billowed it out behind her like a distorted hump.

When she saw that his unhurried strokes were bringing him at a snail's pace, she lifted her voice and hailed him shrilly. The sound carried to him

like the shriek of some fiendish prophet. She saw him bend swiftly over his oars. When he was opposite the jetty, he called to her:

"What's the matter with you?"

She beckoned to him furiously. He pulled in close to the rocks and peered up at her anxiously.

"Git out!" she commanded. "I got somethin' to tell ye!"

Something in her wild manner, in the convulsive working of her mouth and her gesticulating arms, filled Peter with a vague dread. He climbed out, hooked a prong of his anchor into a crevice of the rocks, and crawled up beside her. She watched him come, with her yellow grin making a gash between her hooked nose and chin.

"Ye're a smart one, *you* are!" she cried.

He glared down at her malignantly. The fever of his passion and grief seemed to have burned his skin until it hung like withered parchment on his high cheek bones. His bloodshot eyes moved restlessly, as if they could no longer focus on a given point.

"Ye're a smart one, *you* are!" she repeated. "Leastwise, ye may think ye are——"

"What do you want? What are you cacklin' about?" he demanded.

She laughed.

"Mebbe ye think ye got yer girl all fine an' married off to a rich feller! Mebbe ye *think* so!"

Peter's fists knotted.

"Well, and what of it?"

"I don't have to speak!" she gloated. "Here—¹ read this!"

He took the envelope, held it at arm's length, and studied out the words. She watched his face, pre-

pared either to run or to stay and gloat, as his expression dictated; but his eyes clung to the envelope, dazed at first, then with a vague expression of astonishment.

"Read inside, too!" she suggested. "Read inside!"

Obediently he took out the folded sheet of paper and perused the invitation with sedulous care. Then his eyes sought hers—dim, puzzled. She laughed triumphantly.

"Married!" she shrilled. "He's married—been married fer years! Read the date on the top, an' ye'll see! A lot of good a wedding'll do *him*, even if it was a minister done it!"

"Married!" he echoed.

"Her name's Della," Rose Ruby informed him, and smacked her lips with relish over this succulent detail. "Her name's Della. Mebbe he got tired of her, er mebbe he's got a harem, like them Turks ye read about. I've heard tell New York ain't much better'n Turkey nowadays!"

Peter had stood quite still as she talked, his face expressionless, his eyes fixed before him. Now he slipped the letter into his pocket, brushed past her, and started picking his way across the stones toward the shore. She followed him, warmed by the after-glow of her exultation, too much engrossed in her delectable introspections to wonder at his lack of emotion.

He trudged steadily up the road and across the lawn to the arbored back porch. Here he climbed out of his high boots and padded to the sink. Rose Ruby's eyes followed him, vaguely troubled, vaguely disappointed at his unresponsiveness—like an actress whose best speech has fallen flat. He seemed un-

aware of her presence as he lathered his hands and face with soap, rinsed them, and dried them on the roller towel. With meticulous care he parted and brushed his thin hair. Then he started for the hall, and turned to her at the door.

"Make me a cup of tea," he commanded, and disappeared up the stairs.

Nonplused, she hurried to the stove, touched a match to the fire that she had laid earlier that morning, filled the teakettle, and put it on to boil. There was something disquieting in the way Peter had accepted her momentous news—something that made her faintly self-reproachful. For the first time her thoughts went out to the girl whose tragic secret she had unearthed. She wondered what the old man would do about it.

She was setting a place at the table when he came down, dressed in the baggy, gray suit that he kept for his New London trips, carrying the soft hat that was part of this significant costume. She gulped back her curiosity, silenced by the strange look in his eyes, and said meekly:

"I'll bring yer tea. Do ye want some bread an' butter?"

He shook his head. Going to the mantel, he took down the shiny Colt, examined it carefully, and slipped it into his hip pocket.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MINISTER TALKS

AS the clergyman's car chugged its way toward the village, his thoughts seesawed uneasily between Richard Sells and Dorcas. He was moved anew to admiration by the fact that Richard had found courage to resist the appeal of the girl's voice. There was heroism in this—heroism that would remain untrumpeted.

He was marshaling a little army of soothing and congratulatory phrases as he let himself into his house and hurried up the stairs. He found Richard pacing the floor of the spare room, a figure at once grotesque and tragic—coatless, disheveled, with tufts of dark hair barbing the bandages that wound his head. He swung about on the clergyman and fixed him with a hot glare.

Mr. Beckwith regarded him pityingly.

"You—you heard?"

Richard nodded. For the first time the little clergyman's eyes took in the significance of those hastily donned clothes, the rumpled and abandoned bed.

"You heard," he repeated gently, "and yet you kept faith. You'll have your reward, my boy!"

"Reward, bosh! I kept faith, as you call it, for her sake," Richard countered defiantly, "and for no other reason, you may be sure! Your pussy-footing cant, your smug talk of right and wrong, didn't in-

fluence me any more than it did her! You had to make me out a cad——”

“Oh, no!”

“But you did!”

“I appealed to her love for you, since she was impervious to anything else.” The clergyman’s smile was forced. “If you shared her views, why didn’t you come down and take her at her word?”

Richard’s clenched hands flung out in a hopeless gesture.

“I was near it—you don’t know how near; but I didn’t do it, because I love her—because my love is greater than my desire. I was afraid she was too young to understand what she was saying, and I couldn’t take advantage of her youth and innocence.”

The clergyman’s scrupulously preserved patience began to show signs of crumbling at last. He spoke slowly to conceal his irritation and the sense of crowding futility that assailed him.

“Well, at any rate, you did keep faith. Let’s not question your motives. Dorcas is home again. Her father shall be made to understand the situation, and youth is resilient. That should be a comfort to you.”

“A comfort!” Richard laughed. “Yes—you *would* say that!”

The little clergyman’s nerves seemed to be growing more and more brittle.

“Yes, I would,” he said. “I have lived long enough to give pain its true valuation. Youth is inclined to overestimate its grief. I’ve lived long enough to know that you will find compensation in the future; and the greatest compensation you will have will be the memory of your sacrifice.”

But Richard had been tortured out of his self-

control. The clergyman's gentle benignity was salt on his raw wounds. He sank down on the bed and buried his face in his cupped hands.

"Oh, it's easy for you to talk! You're used to juggling with human souls, throwing them the sop of religion to keep them in order. It's easy for you to talk about compensation and comfort. How could you know what we are suffering?"

"I think I do, my boy."

The minister's nerves caught fire.

"I expect, like all young people, you thinks yours is an isolated case," he observed with gently irony; "but sorrow is not so impartial, my friend."

Richard glanced up, dragged out of his wretched preoccupation by a compelling undertone beneath the words.

"Do you think I would venture to prescribe for a malady of which I knew nothing?" Mr. Beckwith asked unsteadily. "Do you think that because I have passed my years in this serene little place, I must have been immune? Do you think I live a lonely life because I choose to do so, my friend?"

Richard was gazing up at him haggardly. For the first time he saw the little man as an individual, instead of a nebulous factor of his own disenchantment.

"You—you, too?" he said wonderingly.

"I should have been an anomaly, a freak, if I had been overlooked. When I talk to you of sacrifice, and promise you compensation, I'm not prescribing medicine for you that I haven't been forced to take myself." He strolled to the bureau and moved a pin tray with careful accuracy. "I know what I'm talking about, you see. I once loved Dorcas' mother."

The words played a nostalgic tune in the silence, lending the clergyman's face a faint glow. After a moment he took them up again with wistful reminiscence.

"I loved her, and I believed that she loved me—until Peter Stayton's ship rode into port one fine morning." He sighed gently. "I married them. It was my first marriage ceremony—and the most difficult one I ever performed."

He tucked his hands together behind his back. He might have forgotten Richard's presence, so remote were his brooding thoughts. "Well, they were happy. I found my first bit of comfort in that. Pete was a fine man. They made a handsome pair—I had to admit that, though it cost me a pang, I can tell you! You can understand that I was pretty sorry for myself. I thought life had treated me shabbily indeed."

He turned and smiled dimly across at Richard, whose eyes were fixed upon him incredulously.

"I had to preach endurance and charity and self-denial and hope to my congregation, when all those words were so many mockeries to me, and when I wasn't fit—spiritually—to preach to any one." He was smiling grimly now. "Sunday after Sunday I've stood in my pulpit, looking down at all those good, attentive faces raised to mine—and seeing only Pete Stayton sitting there with the woman I loved and coveted. Yes, I coveted her! I wanted her, as any man wants the woman he loves. I admitted it to myself then, just as I admit it now to you. The more I coveted her, the louder I preached, and my congregation never knew that I was preaching all those sermons to myself; but that was about the size

of it, you see, and eventually they began to take effect."

"And you had to stay near her, and yet not have her!" said Richard.

"That," replied the clergyman, and there was a latent note of triumph in his voice, "grew to be one of my compensations. The next best thing to having her myself was to know that she was happy with some one else. I used to watch over her, waiting for the first sign of unhappiness in her eyes; but it never came. I suppose she had guessed how I felt. Women know these things somehow. At any rate, she was kind to me, and in some ways she depended on me; so, as I said, I found my compensation."

Richard got up slowly and went across to the clergyman. Half mad with grief, the confession had sobered him as nothing else would have done.

"Mr. Beckwith, I've been an ungrateful, egotistical fool. I hope you'll forgive me. I hope you won't think too badly of me——"

His voice faltered. The other man filled the embarrassed hiatus with a reassuring laugh.

"Oh, come, come! There's nothing for me to forgive. I simply told you about myself because I thought it might help." He grinned and patted Richard's arm. "Misery loves company, you know. We're all inclined to think that our particular sorrow is worse than the other fellow's. I was no exception to the rule, you may be sure; but fate is pretty impartial. She hands out her crosses without showing any favoritism. It's the way we carry them, not their weight, that gives us any eminence."

"Then you've achieved your eminence," Richard said. "You've made me feel pretty small!"

There was awe in Richard's eyes as they clung to

the clergyman's. There was nothing heroic in that spare figure garbed in its unpretentious serge, which was slightly thin about the knees and elbows, and unmistakably frayed about the cuffs. There was no suggestion of erudition in Mr. Beckwith's manner, and the echo of his religious exhortations did not extend far beyond the old stone church next door. Yet Richard was aware suddenly of a quality of greatness in the little man, of an exhaustless tolerance for human frailties, of an infinitude of charity and love. He saw suddenly why the little stone church outstripped its competitors in point of membership.

"You—you've been a real help to me," he stammered. "Not that I'm reconciled; but I apologize. I had no intention of venting my spleen on you."

His manifest humility distressed the little clergyman.

"Apologize? Bosh! As to your being reconciled, of course you're not reconciled. How many of us are? But you'll pull through, and I congratulate you, my boy!"

He took Richard's hand warmly, and hurried on to forestall any further protestations of gratitude.

"I took the child home, but Pete wasn't around. Neither was the old lady. I saw that the poor girl was almost dead for want of sleep, so I made her lie down, and in two minutes she was in dreamland. She's sleeping still, I hope—in the tower. That's where she wanted to be, it seems."

"In the tower!" Richard echoed.

Richard threw himself on the bed, yielding to the same hopeless apathy that had taken possession of the girl. He realized that only now had he ceased to combat the overwhelming forces arrayed against him. It was only now that he admitted to him-

self that Dorcas had indeed gone out of his life. True, he had given her up; but still, unconsciously, he had nursed a blind, unreasoning hope. He could see now just how blind, how unreasoning, it had been.

The clergyman followed him to the bed, and beamed encouragingly upon him.

"It's not easy, my boy, but you'll get your reward."

"*You* can say that," Richard mused.

"Yes—I can say it!" declared the minister, with a touch of aggressiveness.

Downstairs he scurried about, rallying Mrs. Mills on the inferior quality of her morning rolls.

"You notice our guest scorned them!" he taunted roguishly.

She told him reproachfully that there was to be roast beef for dinner.

"That poor young man looks as if a little red meat wouldn't do him any harm," she added.

"And it won't," Mr. Beckwith agreed; "especially if he eats as much for dinner as he did for breakfast. If you happen to think of it, you might just run across to old Nan Segew's with a slice of the roast beef—and a potato, if there happens to be an extra one."

Mrs. Mills impaled him with a reproving glance, which found and exposed the underlying guile beneath that suggestion.

"As if you didn't know she'd go and save it for that worthless son of hers! Goodness knows where he'd get anything to eat, if it weren't for the things you pretend to send over to his mother! That's where all the food I take to *her* goes."

He left her, chuckling to himself, secure in the

knowledge that old Nan and her ne'er-do-well son would dine sumptuously on roast beef and browned potatoes.

Coming out of his study, five minutes later, hat in hand, he espied old Peter Stayton clumping purposefully up the porch steps. He hurried to open the door.

"Well, of all things! Just the man I was looking for! Come in, Pete, come in!"

He wondered, as he spoke, whether Richard's door was still open, and whether Peter's gruff "How be ye, parson?" had found its way up the stairs. As he followed his caller into the neat parlor, there was a creeping fear in his heart—fear born of the sea captain's unusual garb and of the portentous solemnity of the worn old face.

"I was coming down to have a chat with you," the clergyman said. "I was just starting, as a matter of fact. Suppose you let me drive you back?"

Peter shook his head.

"No need of goin' back. Glad I saved ye the trip."

He sat down gingerly on the edge of a straight chair, his hat dangling from his lumpy fingers.

"I'm jest on my way to town—got to make that New York train; but I wanted to see ye a minute before I went."

"To New York!" the minister echoed. "But what on earth——"

"To New York," repeated Peter a little fiercely. "Before I go, I want to find out somethin' about—well, weddin's. How——"

"Weddings!"

"Ye know"—the old man was fumbling for words, twisting his hat around and around—"what I mean

is, when ye marry a couple, ye make a sort of record of it in the—the log, don't ye?"

"We file a record of the marriage, of course; but——"

"Then that's what ye did about—about that one the other night—about Dorie's an' *his*. Ye filed that one, did ye?"

"No, Pete, I hadn't come to that."

"Then don't bother about doin' it, parson." Peter got up slowly, twirling his hat. "Jest don't bother about makin' any record of that one—see?"

The clergyman also rose.

"Sit down, Pete. You're not going yet. You haven't seen Dorcas?"

"Oh, I'll see her soon enough!" replied her father.

"Then you don't know where she is?"

Peter's eyes narrowed.

"I guess she won't be hard to find!" he said.

He took a long stride toward the door, but the clergyman was beside him, laying peremptory fingers on the gray coat sleeve.

"You're right—she isn't going to be hard to find; but I'm afraid you're on the wrong scent. Sit down, I tell you! I've something to say to you."

Peter halted, but he looked down at the little man ominously.

"Sorry, parson—I got to make that train."

"And I say you're not going until you've heard me out!" The sunken, blood-threaded eyes of the sea captain met the determined glint in the clergyman's eyes. "Sit down and listen to me."

"I tell ye——"

"You don't have to tell me anything, Peter Stayton. I'm going to tell *you* a few things. Maybe

you think it was an oversight on my part that I filed no record of that marriage."

Peter took in the significance of that slowly.

"We-ell, warn't it?"

"No!"

"Then"—Peter's fists came together in the crown of the hat they crushed—"then ye *knew* it warn't legal?"

The minister's eyes were steady. He lowered his voice.

"A *forced* marriage is never legal, Pete!"

"Forced! Then ye knew——"

"That's something you failed to take into consideration when you made such excellent use of your revolver!"

The disintegration of the old sea captain's self-command was like the swift demolition of some great structure.

"Ye know that?"

"I know you forced those young people into marriage."

"Oh, ye do, do ye?" Wrath had robbed him of his voice, and the words were scarcely audible. "Then mebbe ye know *why* I forced 'em?"

"I know you gave credence to the word of a half-mad old woman."

"She told the truth, fer once!"

"The mouth of fools poureth out foolishness," quoted the clergyman trenchantly. "Yet that was all the evidence you had!"

"So ye know that, too, do ye?" Fury took full possession of the old sailor's gaunt figure. "Mebbe, if ye know so much, ye knew that he was married already?"

"Yes, I know that, too."

"An' he come up here an' ruined my girl——"

"No!"

"When he had a wife in New York! Did ye know *that*? Did ye know that he was a dirty, lyin' skunk, yellow clean through? An' she left me fer him after I told her what he was!"

The room shook and reverberated under the impact of the old sea captain's voice. The clergyman raised an admonishing hand, and glanced fearfully toward the open windows, but Peter was beyond silencing now.

"She left me fer him, when he'd ruined her! That's what she's turned out to be! I'm goin' to kill him! I may hang fer it, but I'll put him out of the world first! I'm goin' to kill him—him and the wanton together!"

"And I'll kill *you* for that!"

They both swung about at the voice, and for an instant a hideous quiet held the room. Coatless, his shirt open at the throat, the bulky bandages still swathing his head, Richard stood swaying in the doorway.

Even in the befuddled frenzy which the appearance of the New Yorker had produced in the little clergyman's thoughts, he was conscious of the ludicrous disparity between the heroic words and the ineffectuality of that threatening figure. To Peter, the shock, of Richard's sudden presence was only momentary. The next instant the old sailor was lunging forward, his right hand fumbling frantically toward his hip pocket; but the clergyman was between the two enraged men when they came together in the center of the room.

"Stop, for God's sake!"

"I'm goin' to kill him!"

"You heard what he called Dorcas!"

But the minister's voice rose compellingly, while with his shoulder he pressed hard against the right arm of the old sea captain.

"Stop, I say! Stop, both of you! I'll have no bloodshed in my house! If there is vengeance here, it is God's!"

"Step aside, parson!"

"You heard what he said!"

Their gusty breathing, their abortive imprecations, their desperately writhing bodies, wrapped him in an infernal din.

"If that gun goes off, it'll kill *me*, not the boy, Pete!"

"Then get out of the way!"

"Never! You're acting like an old fool! Get back, Richard!"

"I'm goin' to kill him!"

Mr. Beckwith fell back on unsuspected strategic forces.

"But where's Dorcas? If you want to kill them both, why don't you find out where she is?"

"She ain't far off, if he's here!"

"But she isn't—I swear it! Do you want to hang with your job only half done?"

Richard caught fire from the words, and stepped back precipitately.

"Yes, kill me! You'll die for it, and she will be safe!"

It was enough to confuse the maddened senses of the old man. The clergyman felt the tense figure relax, saw that the revolver was dangling heedlessly from those shaking fingers, as his own hand struck out for Peter's wrist. There was the force of an invincible spirit behind the blow. It sent the Colt

sliding across the carpeted floor, where it came to rest among the faded roses beneath a plush-covered sofa, like a stray bit of sun glaze. Then he whirled on the two stunned figures—a righteous typhoon.

"How dare you? How dare you come into my house and stage a cheap melodrama? How dare you violate this room with your threats and your accusations and your unholy words?"

It was the reaction of shattered nerves, but it held the two men as nothing else would have done.

"How dare you, Peter Stayton? After desecrating your fatherhood, and blaspheming your own child, how dare you come here armed like a cheap bandit? Sit down—there, in that chair! Make a move toward that gun, and I'll have the whole town in here to hear your tale! How would you like that? Sit down!"

"I tell ye, he's——"

"You're a fool to come blustering into my house like a madman!"

The rapid fire of the clergyman's words, such unexpected violence on the part of one noted for his gentleness, had left Peter dazed. Big as he was, he yielded to Mr. Beckwith's clutch on his arm and sank down in the designated chair, his eyes blinking stupidly.

"Haven't you done enough as it is? What has happened to you, anyway? I used to think you were a Christian and a gentleman!"

"So I be, but——"

"You're not! You're a menace to humanity—a disgrace to Christianity!" The clergyman shook his short arms above his head. "And I'm not much better. I saw evil, too; but it was all the outgrowth of your own base suspicion—all this mess. You see

what a lying tongue can do. 'The tongue is a little member, yet it defileth the whole body.'"

"But I tell ye I know——"

"That's just it!" broke in the clergyman. "You don't *know* anything about it. You had no knowledge—all you had was suspicion!"

Peter Stayton's voice rose in wavering justification.

"I know he's married, and he ruined my girl!"

"How do you *know* he ruined her?"

"They was out all night? She said so herself."

"And she explained why, didn't she? They were out like any other couple of young idiots looking at the moon!"

"And they was alone together in the tower all that night ye married 'em!"

"Yes—gazing on the wreckage you had made of their lives—trying to think of some way out of their difficulty—some way that would save her name and yours. But you hadn't done enough—you must turn your own daughter out of her home. It was like giving her a ticket to hell!"

"That ain't so! She didn't have to go if she warn't guilty!"

"But do you think her pride would let her explain, after that?"

"Pride! If she'd 'a' had any pride, would she have gone off with him?"

"How do you know she's gone off with him? He's here, but do you see *her*?"

The old man got slowly, painfully, to his feet. A palsied age had descended upon him as he looked at Richard still standing against the door.

"Well, why ain't she here? Why ain't she here to take her own part?"

Though the question was flung at Richard, it was the clergyman's resonant voice that replied:

"Because she's at home, where I left her two hours ago. She's at home, where she ought to be, and asleep. Sit down again. You're going to hear *me* talk now!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

RETURNED FEARS

LEFT alone in the big, white house, Rose Ruby moved about it mechanically, carried along on the impetus of long-established habits. She muttered discontentedly to herself as she dusted the dim parlor and swept the little back porch. It was when she had sat down to a cold triangle of pie and a cup of freshly brewed tea, in the kitchen, that the significance of Peter's conduct roused her, first to resentment, then to alarm. She suddenly became a prey to a myriad of vague fears as she realized that the old man's quiescence had been unnatural. This memory aroused the most immediate of her fears. Others were suggested by the fact that he had taken the revolver.

Disappointment mingled with her apprehensions as she went over the facts retrospectively. She had discovered something that should have induced a berserk rage equal to that which had greeted her tale of Dorcas' defection three nights before; but for some inexplicable reason her shot had fallen short of its mark. It had fallen with a dull thud upon some incombustible reserve of the old man's nature. There was something more ominous in this than in his tempestuous rages.

From the first, the tragedy that underlay her discovery had been secondary to the effect she had hoped it would have on Peter. It was in the lurid

light and afterglow of scandal that Rose Ruby's soul achieved its fullest expansion. Now she felt cheated. She was sure that somewhere a thrilling conflagration was seething—somewhere out of her sight and hearing. Three days of rich excitement had imbued her with a hearty distaste for the humdrum monotony that she felt settling about her.

She sipped her tea gloomily, reproaching herself for her lack of resource. The match had been in her own hand, and she had relinquished it, unkindled, to the old man. He had taken the letter and the gun. What would he do with them? There had been murder in his eyes! The thought opened up a vista of stirring possibilities.

Murder! The word became a gradual reality. It awoke a genuine fear in the blurred chaos of Rose Ruby's mind. If he contemplated murder, it was indirectly her fault. She should have stopped him. Perhaps, even now, she should follow him and sound a warning.

Where had he gone? To New York, of course—but where?

Her horny fingers were plucking at the fringe on her shawl. First bigamy—then murder! The town would ring with it.

Peter was not in Standish. The noon train for New York had left. He was aboard, doubtless—with the gun in his pocket. Rose Ruby shrank from the certainty of death, even as she reveled in its undated possibility, its rich aftermath of curtained carriages and veiled mourners and flowers. Given a definite subject, a definite date, and it assumed the grisly aspect of an inescapable calamity. Richard's face drew itself between her eyes and the bland view

beyond the open window. She saw him dead with a bullet in his heart.

She got up and hobbled back and forth over the kitchen floor, haunted by that vision. It occurred to her that she must do something—must take some step to thwart the old man's bloody purpose. She must follow him.

But where should she go? The address so clearly written on the envelope had become a blur in her memory. Her thoughts flew to the tower room, to the heaped luggage. Perhaps she should find the address there, among Richard's papers.

She hurried out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Once found, she would take it to the clergyman. He would know what to do.

She stumbled up the stairs, breathing hard through her open mouth, one hand clutching the shawl over her flat breasts. She was gasping horribly when she reached the tower landing and flung open the door; and there she halted, while her yellow skin took on a greenish hue and her nether lip dropped away from her teeth.

Dorcas was still asleep, one arm flung above her head, her fingers curled in her palm. A faint pink flush was on her cheeks. A salty tang was in the breeze that floated in at the window and fluttered the loosened hair about the girl's temples.

But Rose Ruby was conscious only of the motionless figure on the couch. The girl she had believed to be miles away was lying here in the tower room which, only a few hours before, she herself had left tenantless.

She tried to turn back to the door, but a nightmare of helplessness paralyzed her. She began to emit a cry of terror, but it died in her throat. She

felt all her strength oozing out of her cold limbs as they collapsed beneath her

It was the fall of her body that awoke the sleeping girl. Dorcas sat up, blinking at the outlandish heap of rusty alpaca, wisps of gray hair, and wrinkled shoe tops.

"Why, Rose Ruby! What's the matter? What has happened? Where is——"

The old woman's head came up with a jerk. She stared blankly before her for a moment before the crisp voice restored her.

"Dorcas!"

"What's the trouble? What do you want?"

"You all right—you *alive*?"

"Alive! What do you mean?"

Rose Ruby laughed, a jangle of nervous cackles, as she dragged herself to her feet.

"How'd *you* get here? He told me you was gone. Ye *was* gone this mornin'!"

Dorcas swung her feet to the floor, her eyes widening.

"What time is it? Where is Mr. Beckwith? I must have been asleep. Where's my father?"

"Asleep! Yes, I guess ye been asleep, all right!" The old woman's aplomb came back with a rush. Here was more drama—rich, unplumbed depths of it. "Ye did go away, didn't ye? Ye've got on yer best dress."

"Never mind about me, Rose Ruby. Where is Mr. Beckwith? He said he would stay with me."

"But ye *did* go," persisted Rose Ruby, coming closer. "Ye went off with him, didn't ye? He thought ye did."

"I didn't ask you what any one thought, Rose Ruby." Dorcas rose and smoothed her dark dress.

Memory had lined her face again. "Where is Mr. Beckwith?"

"How do I know? I ain't seen him. I ain't seen nobody. Did he jilt ye—that man ye married? Don't ye know where *he* is?"

The girl made a contemptuous gesture.

"Go downstairs, please, Rose Ruby."

"If ye do know where he is, ye better go and warn him!"

"Warn whom?"

"That man—the one ye got married to."

"Warn him—warn him!"

Rose Ruby shrank back from the gleam in those avid eyes.

"Yer father's gone off after him with a gun, to kill him!"

CHAPTER XXIX

A MESSENGER

DUSK spread an opaque gray vapor over the harbor at Havre. It lent the masts and smokestacks of a massive French liner, hugged in between her wharves, a misty aura. It deadened the thump of freight falling on the lower decks, and blurred the sharp clatter of trucks lumbering ceaselessly across the gangplank to deposit their burdens in the hold.

To-morrow, at the sailing hour, she would present the nonchalance and the trim hospitality of a suave hostess receiving her guests, but to-night the utilitarian essentials must be disposed of.

A seasoned traveler, Della had been craftily liberal in the matter of tips. She had the seasoned traveler's suave facility for overcoming the trivial obstacles that clutter the path of the uninitiated.

Three months ago her stateroom had been banked and bowered with flowers, her desk a riot of telegrams and notes and gaudily decked candy boxes. To-night, in the seclusion of the enveloping dusk, a sextet of muscular longshoremen made their way down the gangplank, their shoulders weighted down by a heavy oblong box. Aboard ship, this became part of the heterogeneous cargo, though it occupied a chilly crypt by itself, slightly apart from the other insensate lumps below deck. Its solitary niche was the full sum of its importance—this and the fact

that it imbued the boatmen who carried it with a momentary gravity.

But mute and obscure as the rough box in the hold might be, its arrival was not to be unheralded. Fate's ablest amanuensis scented it, in the passing of Della Sells, an event that merited a certain fanfare of trumpets. The cable that reached the law firm of Billings & Newell was closely followed by another that found its way into the avid clatter of a newspaper office on Park Row, and sent a grimy-fisted rewrite man into the archives of the office "morgue," and after that into a telephone booth.

Ten minutes after Horace Billings had clipped short the solicitous ejaculations of Richard Sells' chauffeur, the receiver was at his ear again, and he was cursing heartily into the transmitter.

"Damned ghouls!" he expostulated to the empty office, when he had hung up.

He burst into his partner's office without knocking for admission.

"Well, Ches, they've got hold of it already!" he cried.

"Who's got hold of what?"

"The newspaper buzzards called up Dick's man, and he set them onto me. They want a statement from Dick. They want to know whether it's true that Hal Dubose was with her. They want to know if she went with the intention of suing for a divorce in Paris. They want to have her latest picture." He was pacing the room angrily. "That's all they want, except Dick's present address. They make me want to punch somebody's nose!"

"Well, don't. It wouldn't do any good," Newell observed sagely. "What did you tell 'em?"

"To go to hell!"

"I'm afraid they'd balk at that. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to lay off and shoot out to that backwoods hole myself. They'll be sure to find him, but maybe I can beat them to it."

"You're going out to-day?"

"What else can I do? I owe Dick that much. They'll nose him out and bleed him for copy, even if he's just about ready to cash in himself. You look after things, will you? If any more of 'em call up, put 'em off the scent. Tell them Dick's in Bermuda, or Canada, for his health."

Still muttering bitterly, he flung himself out of his office, and half an hour later saw Richard's touring car purring its way out of the city.

The village of Standish had cleared away the débris of its noon meal, and the resultant apathy seemed to have communicated itself to the very common and the drooping elms that bordered it, when the chauffeur eased the machine to a crawl at the corner of Maple and Main Streets.

"This must be the place, Mr. Billings," he said politely. "Don't know where the minister lives, do you?"

The young lawyer, his good nature restored, shook his head and glanced about him.

"Let's hail 'Old Hundred' over there and ask him where the preacher chap lives. I mean the fellow with the fishing pole and the original hat—see him?"

It was old Nan Segew's errant offspring, who, his pole hung across his shoulder, with a fusty basket dangling from its tip, was making his leisurely way toward the beach and a favored and little-known rendezvous of snapper blues. He halted as the big

car drew up to the curb, and regarded its two passengers with the habitual resentment he entertained toward all creatures who showed any inclination to accelerate his mental or physical processes.

"Can you tell us where a minister by the name of Beckwith lives, stranger?"

The stranger, whose bleary gaze was sedulously taking in the rich details of the car, completed his ocular inventory, gave a nod of approbation for its shiny perfection, tipped a battered straw hat over one ear, so that he might scratch his head without the labor of removing it entirely, spat deftly into the gutter, and looked inquiringly up at the questioner.

"Beckwith!" muttered old Nan's cherished responsibility. "Mebbe ye mean Parson Beckwith?"

"Maybe I do," said the lawyer gently.

But the mention of the minister's name had connoted a succulent vision of ruddy roast beef and mealy brown potatoes in the gustatory memories of Nan's son. He smiled reminiscently over a few meager remnants of discolored teeth before he cleared his throat preparatory to speech.

"No hurry, friend," Billings encouraged.

"Beckwith, ye say?"

"I did—I do!"

"He lives right down thar, the parson does." Mr. Segew pointed with a grubby finger tip. "That there stone house nigh onto the church—that's where *he* lives."

The young lawyer laid a hand across his breast and made a profound bow. Thus encouraged, old Nan's offspring was about to deliver a homily anent the minister's generosity and the culinary skill of his housekeeper; but by the time he had marshaled a choice array of words for the task, he found that

his audience had evaporated in a cloud of gaseous smoke and dust. He took this as a personal affront, and made his way toward the doomed snapper blues, muttering darkly.

The door of the stone house yielded the pleasant face of Mrs. Mills. On her way to the door she had discarded her gingham apron, and had brought to light the little white, beruffled affair kept spotlessly white beneath its more useful fellow.

"The doctor's not in just now," she told the lawyer ruefully. "He left the house about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Well, that's too bad!" Billings twirled his hat gravely. "However, it can't be helped, I suppose. As a matter of fact, it isn't so urgent that I should see him as that I should see his guest."

"Guest?"

"A Mr. Sells, who is stopping here, I believe."

Mrs. Mills' placid pink face appeared to contract oddly. She was no dissembler, yet she had been bound to silence by one whose word she respected next to the one that he so ardently preached. She smoothed her apron nervously, and lowered her voice.

"I'm afraid," she said gently, "that you'll have to see Mr. Beckwith himself. I don't know any Mr. Sells."

"But I understood he was stopping here. Mr. Beckwith phoned me this morning. It's very urgent that I should see him."

"I don't know the name," she repeated sturdily, not a little proud that she had skirted the perilous danger of a downright lie. "I'm afraid you'll have to see the doctor——"

"But you say——"

"If you were to ask him——"

"But you say he isn't home!"

"Yes, but I can tell you where to find him," she offered brightly. "He's just gone down to Cap'n Stayton's house. If you were to drive down there, you could see him."

Billings' perplexity vanished in his smile.

"I shall be glad to if you'll direct us."

"It's as easy as anything," she said, and came out on the porch, cautiously closing the door behind her, relieved at this ready transfer of her responsibility. "Follow the main road straight down, and take the first turn to the right. That's the road that leads to the beach, and it'll take you right past the house. A big, white house it is, with a lookout tower on it."

The lawyer thanked her. She stood for a moment admiring the big car before she turned back into the hall and met Richard hurrying down the stairs, and pulling on his coat as he came.

"I saw them drive off!" he cried. "I thought I knew that voice! Were they asking for me?"

"Yes, but the doctor told me——"

"Where have they gone?"

"Down to Cap'n Stayton's. The doctor said I wasn't to give it out about you're being here, and really I didn't know"—she shook her head emphatically—"that your name was Sells."

"Well, it would have been all right in this case," said Richard, and started back up the stairs.

Mrs. Mills' eyes followed him anxiously before her voice stopped him.

"Maybe I should tell you that he said it was something urgent he wanted to see you about."

He came back to her, fumbling at his tie, a troubled anxiety in his eyes.

"Then I guess I'd better go down and see what it is they want."

"But the doctor'll bring them back with him——"

"No, no!" He spoke with the petulance of ragged nerves, and began tearing at the bandages on his head. "I'll go down—meet them coming back, probably. I can't sit here like a bump on a log. I'll go to meet them, if you'll just help me get these darned rags off my head!"

CHAPTER XXX

DEATH!

FOR the second time that day the clergyman choked off the asthmatic engine of his little car before the gate of the old white house. For the second time he led the way up the graveled path, the gaunt and weary figure of the old sea captain dragging behind him. But now no jovial pleasantries embroidered their progress. White and shaken and frankly old, the stout bars of Mr. Beckwith's sunny optimism were down, and fatigue had crowded through the breach.

He led the way into the kitchen, threw his hat on a chair, and turned to Peter. Beneath his beard his lips were set in a tight, thin line, and there was no enlivening twinkle in the eyes that he bent upon the penitent.

"Well!" he said. "Are you ready?"

The scorn in the speaker's voice escaped Peter. He seemed unaware that he was back in his own kitchen.

"Ready?" he repeated, and sank into a chair.

"Yes—ready to go on your knees to Dorcas and beg her forgiveness."

"She's gone, Dorie is." Peter looked vacantly about him. "Ye see, she ain't here."

"But she is—no thanks to you!" The clergyman bent over him and shook him roughly by the shoulder. "Come, wake up, Peter! You were alive

enough a while ago, when you had your gun to do your talking for you!"

"Yes, yes!"

Peter lifted his head and moved it dubiously from side to side. For three days his world had lurched and quivered through the hot, red haze of his wrath. Now, stripped of his purblind assurance by the hideous hour just behind him, he was like a man who goes suddenly from the dazzling sunlight into a dim and unfamiliar room.

"Yes," he repeated. "Ye told me she was here, but I don't see her. Mebbe she went, after all."

The clergyman shook his head. Behind the stove, on the mantel, the figure of the little black boy counted up an endless array of seconds, and apportioned them off into long, silent moments. The distant lapping of waves against the sand—the squeak of a sleepy sandpiper—the lazy breeze brought these sounds in to them before they were aware of swiftly running steps along the upper hall and on the stairs. Then Dorcas' voice reached them, shrill and high.

"Mr. Beckwith! Where are you?"

The clergyman moved quickly across the room, so that when the door swung open he was between the inert figure of the old man and the girl. At sight of him she stopped short on the threshold. Her loosened hair was tumbling about her shoulders, her widened eyes were full of terror.

"Father! We must find father! You remember he was gone this morning. We must find him! He's gone to follow Richard—to kill him!"

"Tut, tut! Kill! What a word!" Mr. Beckwith hurried toward her. "You've been dreaming, child!"

"He has—Rose Ruby said so. She said he took the revolver!"

The clergyman laid his arm about the girl's shoulders, and moved so that the old sea captain, hunched over the table, came within her line of vision.

"Why, he's here!" Dorcas would have flung herself forward, but the clergyman's clasp tightened about her shoulders. "Then he *has* killed him!"

"I tell you, Dorcas, you've been dreaming—or Rose Ruby has."

Peter shuffled awkwardly to his feet, his guilty gaze wavering between them. The girl relaxed against the clergyman, but her eyes were still wide and full of doubt.

"Then Richard is—all right?"

"Perfectly, child."

Her gaze clung to her father. He steadied himself against the table.

"Dorie, Dorie! Ye didn't go? Ye didn't leave me?"

"Yes, I did," she said dully; "but I came back."

"Of course she did!" the clergyman added, aggressively cheerful.

Peter's voice rose waveringly above the others.

"Dorie, girl, I been adrift, an' I been carryin' the devil's own cargo; but the parson here has towed me in. He don't have to lie fer me. The old hag was right—I meant fer to kill him. I took the gun with me. It's lyin' under the parson's sofy this minute."

"Now, Pete, why go into that?" protested the clergyman, but the old man's voice swept on.

"But I didn't kill him—thank God fer that! I got enough on my soul. I thought he had wronged ye, Dorie. I didn't know what I was doin'." He dragged at his collar as if it were choking him. "Ye didn't mean what ye said this mornin', Dorie—ye

didn't mean that ye hated me? Ye wouldn't do that—ye wouldn't hate yer own father?"

She had been staring at him, seeing him only through the miasma of her own misery; but his words brought back the earlier scene with a rush.

"I did mean it! I did!"

"But ye don't—*now*?" His voice was thin and high, like a very old man's. "Ye don't mean it, now that I own I was wrong? Ye won't be that hard, Dorie? I own I was wrong. It seemed like I went plumb off my head. I'd give my right arm to undo it, Dorie! I'd give my life, if the good Lord would let me have that chance—if I could make ye happy again! I'd give my life, Dorie!"

As he talked, her apathetic gaze had gradually become more aware of him, and her eyes widened in startled wonder. The terrible, primal storm through which he had been struggling had stripped him of the bombastic arrogance that he had so sedulously nurtured. She saw him clearly now—gaunt, worn, stripped of his old half-playful fierceness, an abject shell of the proud paternal figure that she had so loved and admired. With the swift reversal that was her natural heritage from him, she hurried to his side, suddenly on the defensive for him, eager to spare him from further humiliation.

"I've been a wicked, unnatural father, Dorie," he was saying. "I ain't fit to be fergiven——"

"Father, father, don't!" To see him thus stricken made her almost fierce in his defense. "You didn't know! I should have made you listen!"

"I'd give my life to undo it, Dorie!"

"Oh, come, come!" The clergyman's protest was emphatic. "This kind of talk between two sensible persons!"

He glanced wretchedly from father to daughter standing so close together, trying so desperately to bridge the ugly breach between them. He thought how frail the girl looked with her vivid bloom gone, and how the rugged old sea captain's years had snuffed out his buoyant light. All this had come within a short trio of days that might have epitomized the most grisly tragedy of fate.

Once more he was conscious of an awful paucity of words. He was fumbling frantically for a reassuring phrase when steps on the gravel walk outside reached him, and the pleasant voice of Horace Billings spoke from the porch steps.

"Is this the Stayton house, if you please?"

The clergyman went hastily to the door.

"Yes, yes—but Mr. Stayton is engaged just now," he replied.

"I'm looking for Mr. Beckwith," the visitor went on. "I understood from his housekeeper that I should find him here."

"I'm your man." The clergyman was trying desperately to conceal the two tragic figures behind him from the stranger's gaze. "If you can wait for a moment——"

"With pleasure. I'm Billings—Horace Billings. I believe it was you I talked with on the phone this morning."

"Ah, yes—Mr. Sells' lawyer." Mr. Beckwith was edging the caller away from the door. "And you want to see me?"

"Well, it's really Mr. Sells that I particularly want to see. I went to your house, but your housekeeper seemed reluctant to give me any information. She sent me down here."

"Quite right, quite right—though I'm sorry you

had to make the extra trip. I take it you haven't seen Mr. Sells?"

"No."

"Well, if you don't mind waiting for a moment in your car, I shall be going back presently." He was terribly hampered by the thought of the two silent listeners in the kitchen behind him. "I understood you weren't coming up until to-morrow."

"That was the plan, but——"

"Well, well, if you don't mind waiting—or perhaps you'd like to drive down to the beach while I—er—finish up my business here? I can recommend the view."

"Not at all." The young lawyer's voice faltered on a note of reluctance. "Would you mind telling me just how badly off Dick is? I understand he's laid up."

"But it's nothing, nothing," the clergyman assured him heartily. "A slight accident—a scratch or two—nothing serious."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. You see, I've some pretty bad news for him. That's why I came up to-day. I was afraid the reporters might find out where he was and torment him."

"Bad news!" The clergyman's voice was sharp. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'm afraid he isn't in any too good shape to bear up under bad news."

"But he's got to hear it from some source, and better from me than from the newspaper men."

"You mean it's something the newspapers will print?"

"Something you couldn't keep them from printing," Billings said sourly. "His wife has been killed."

A chair scraped on the kitchen floor, but it was

the only sound in the silence that followed the lawyer's announcement. The clergyman's lips moved uselessly before he echoed the words:

"His wife—killed!"

"Abroad—in France; and that's not the worst of it." The lawyer dug his heel viciously into the gravel. "There was a man with her—the sort of bounder who would be likely to let himself in for a thing like that. You can see the lurid story it'll make!"

"Dead!" the minister said slowly. "Come in, will you? I think you had better come in."

His anxious gaze took in the two figures—the girl, who had backed up against the wall, and was standing there with both hands clasped over her breast; Peter, who had dropped into the chair beside the table, and whose eyes were staring unseeingly before him.

"Come in," repeated Mr. Beckwith. "This is Captain Stayton and his daughter. They are friends of Mr. Sells'. He stopped here, as a matter of fact—he has lived here all summer."

The young lawyer bowed awkwardly toward the unresponsive couple. In the hall outside, flattened against the door, where she had been since she had followed the flying girl downstairs, Rose Ruby's scrawny body was shaking in an ague of excitement. The lawyer made a polite allusion to the old house.

"It must have been built a couple of hundred years ago," he said. Then, as there was no response, he addressed the clergyman. "I understood that Dick was stopping with you."

"No—that is, he's there now, but he has been living here with Mr. Stayton all summer," Mr. Beckwith replied absently.

It was then that Rose Ruby flew down the hall to the front door, slipped the heavy bolt, and plunged down the front steps. She lifted her rusty skirt with hands that were clammy wet, and started in a headlong series of leaps and bounds up the road toward the village. As she ran, her lips were drawn away from her teeth in a yellow grin of triumph, and little trickles of saliva dripped from the corners of her mouth.

But the wings of her delighted frenzy did not have to carry her far. Halfway between the white house and her own weather-beaten shack, she espied Richard striding toward her. With an inarticulate gurgles she was upon him, clutching his coat sleeve.

"She's—dead!" she gasped, and fought for breath with which to embellish the announcement, while her eyes peered eagerly through her flying wisps of hair at his stricken face. "Your wife—she's dead!"

"My—my—what are you talking about?"

There was no alarm in his voice, only a faltering wondering. Rose Ruby thrust her face into his. He could feel her hot breath against his cheek.

"She's dead! She's been killed—and a man, too—a man that was with her!"

Sells had her by the shoulders and was shaking her frantically.

"What are you saying? Who's dead? Who has been killed? How do you know? Say it again!"

"Yer wife—— Quit shakin' me! The one that was acrost the ocean—she's dead!"

"You're lying again! How do you know?"

"I ain't lyin'!" Rose Ruby protested vigorously. "I heard him say so—I was listenin'—the man that come in the automobile. He was lookin' fer ye. I heard him tell Pete an' the parson. He's in the

kitchen now. There was a man with her! Her name was Della, warn't it?"

His arms fell away from the old woman.

"You heard him say that?" he said slowly. "My wife——"

"She was killed," repeated Rose Ruby readily. "I heard him tell about it."

But Richard was no longer aware of her. He was looking across the gently undulating fields of beach grass toward a bland blue horizon, against which the pallid tower of the lighthouse loomed like the mast of some wrecked vessel. Instead of the light, instead of the rippling expanse of blue water, he was seeing Della—Della, who had been more vividly alive than anything that peaceful view offered him. And now she was dead. Della—dead!

His long strides sent him forward with Rose Ruby panting at his heels like a devoted dog.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MIRACLE

THE young lawyer was moodily puffing a cigarette, and the little clergyman was pacing the floor in restless misery, flinging occasional reassuring monosyllables across at the silent girl, when Richard appeared in the doorway. He went straight to Billings, who bounced out of his chair and hurried to meet him.

"Dick, old boy——"

But Richard's voice broke through the hearty greeting.

"Is it true—that Della's been—killed?"

The clergyman had joined them, and he laid a solicitous hand on Richard's arm. The lawyer gave an ejaculation of rage.

"For the love of Mike, who——"

"Is it true?" persisted Richard.

"Yes, old man. I meant to keep it for a while, but those damned reporters——"

"Dead!" Richard said. "Della dead! It isn't possible!"

"Sit down, my boy—sit down! That's right!"

The clergyman took the situation into his capable hands. Richard sat down mechanically, but his eyes did not leave the lawyer's face.

"How did it—where was she?"

"France, Dick—an automobile accident. I got the cable this morning. I'm sorry!"

"Yes, I know. France—that's where she was—France!"

His head drooped forward. The clergyman moved swiftly to the sink, for water; but Richard had not lost consciousness.

He was back in Della's room. Her restless figure in its shimmering cloth-of-silver gown was before him. He saw the betasseled gewgaws, the cluttered dressing table, the hoop-skirted figure that served for a light, the satin mules at the foot of the ornate bed, and the immutable complacency of the mid-Victorian marble mantel that she had so cordially hated. Perhaps she had hated it because she had known that it would survive the tinsel medley it frowned upon, as it had survived the bustles and leg-of-mutton sleeves of its own era.

Della had hated any evidence of stability. She had been forever refurnishing her room, as she had been forever refurnishing her mental and social equipment, forever replacing old friends with new. There would be no dog's-eared books, no outdated garments, no pressed flowers of a young romance, to speak for her. Perishable as the impalpable garments that decked her slim body, she had been as ephemeral. He recalled the words she once had used:

"I'd rather be at the wheel, going sixty, than be the poor devil in the middle of the road!"

Well, she had gone sixty, and the man with her—he had gone sixty, too.

Richard lifted his head and found himself looking into Dorcas Stayton's eyes. She was the width of the big room away from him, yet so close did her gaze bring him that it seemed as if he could stretch out his hand and touch her. The sun, slanting across

the room through the lazily billowing curtains, drew bright little patterns on her dark dress, and lent her motionless figure a sort of bright animation.

He half rose from his chair, and sank back again. The young lawyer's foot was nervously tapping the floor. The clergyman was looking at the glass of water in his hand, as if he saw it for the first time. Only Peter was still—Peter, and the breathless Rose Ruby, who was peering in at them from the porch window.

It was Peter who broke the silence, speaking in the abstracted monotone of one emerging from a long trance.

"When did it happen, stranger? Do ye know when?"

"The accident?" The lawyer's voice implied that the question was as superfluous as it was tactless. "A couple of days ago, I believe." He turned to Richard. "Do you feel like hopping back to town with me? Your man's outside with the car; but don't come, of course, unless you feel up to it."

The clergyman spoke his approval with a troubled sidelong glance at Dorcas.

"That's right, my boy. It might be best all around if you could get away to-day."

"Got any luggage, Dick? Guess we can pile it in the car."

Richard got slowly to his feet, his gaze clinging dumbly to the girl; but Peter's voice boomed over them, shocking them into stunned silence by its vibrant, domineering ring.

"Not so fast, there! Not so fast! Ye say the accident happened a couple of days ago, stranger—but what day? I'd like to know the day, if ye don't mind—*and* the hour!"

The lawyer's attention was caught and held by the intensity with which the old man's eyes were fixed upon him. He was an affable young man, the product of a suave and conservative school, inclined to be slightly skeptical, and distrustful of any emotional outburst. From the first moment of his entrance into the big, homely kitchen, he had been vaguely puzzled by the abnormal silence of the old sea captain and the lovely, disheveled girl. Gradually he had sensed in the wordless lethargy of these two, and in the clergyman's sporadic loquacity, a curious tension—an ominous undercurrent.

At Peter's abrupt question, he began confusedly to fumble in his pocket.

"I don't know whether it says here. Let's see." He brought forth a crumpled telegram. "Yes—it says Wednesday, near Quimper, in the department of Finistère——"

"But the time, stranger! Don't it give the hour?"

The clergyman hurried to Peter's side and laid an admonishing hand on his shoulder.

"Now, Peter, let us keep out of this——"

"Don't it give the hour, stranger?" repeated Peter, and got to his feet, shaking off the restraining hand.

"Yes." The lawyer shook his head, somewhat puzzled, and none too tolerant of what seemed to him the crudest audacity. "It says at the hour of sunset—whenever that was."

"Peter, Peter!" The clergyman's voice was shrill with impatience. "Don't you see that Mr. Sells has about all that he can bear now?"

"A little too much, I'd say!" corrected Peter doggedly. "You'd better leave me be, parson!"

"But, father!" The girl spoke her own dismay and horror. "Father, how can you? Remember——"

The old man whirled upon her.

"That's what I'm doin', Dorie!" From some mysterious source he had reclaimed his air of dominant power. "I *am* rememberin', girl!" His voice rang out vibrant, compelling. "I'm rememberin' what I done to ye! I'm rememberin' how I been prayin' to the Lord to give me a chance to undo it!"

"But, Peter!" The clergyman was now terribly distressed. "This is no time for you to think of that!"

"Oh, it ain't, eh? That's where I differ with ye, parson!"

"But there's death here, Peter!"

"Ye're wrong, parson—there's life here!" The old captain gave his shoulders a mighty shake, as if to free himself from the prohibitory forces assailing him. "I admit I been driftin' in strange waters. I ain't see the North Star fer Heaven knows how long, but now I'm beginnin' to get my bearin's an' to shape my course." He turned authoritatively to Richard. "Jest stop a bit, mate—and you, too, stranger. I'm goin' to bring this craft into port!"

The old sailor's sodden apathy was gone. He towered over them, moving his shaggy head from side to side, as if trying to locate some dimly discerned port of call through a lifting mist.

"Don't ye be squeamish, parson—ner Dorie, neither! Suppose every time we buried a poor beggar at sea, we dropped anchor—what would happen to our cargo? Let the dead bury their dead—that's what the Book says, ain't it, parson? As long as there's life aboard, ye got to haul in and keep yer hand on the tiller." His eyes swept the room. "Where's my Bowditch? That's what I want to

now. I been gettin' a little rusty, I have! Where's my Bowditch, eh?"

In his lunging progress across the room he brushed against his chair and sent it clattering to the floor. Involuntarily the trio of men grouped between himself and the mantel shrank away from his volcanic advance.

A plump and musty volume lay beside the clock. This Peter grasped, blew gustily upon its dusty cover, and flipped back its pages, talking steadily all the time to prevent any interruption.

"Ye got yer own Book, parson, an' I got mine. There ain't much difference between 'em, as I can see. If ye follow their teachin's, they'll bring ye out of the shoals—an' that's what this is doin' fer me. I'm shapin' my course—er mebbe it's God's hand has been on the helm all the time." He raised his head to look exultantly at the little clergyman. "Mebbe ye don't believe in miracles, parson?"

Mr. Beckwith answered dazedly, for he was beginning to follow the sea captain's thoughts.

"'While ye have light, believe in light,'" he said. "All life is a miracle, therefore I believe in miracles."

"Ye speak fine, parson! Ye speak fine! There's a miracle here, or I'm mistaken about it!"

Peter lifted his eyes from the spread book, keeping one knotty finger on the open page; but the young lawyer, shaking off the spell the old man had laid upon him, moved swiftly to Richard's side.

"For Heaven's sake, Dick, what is all this? Don't you think——"

That was as far as he got. Peter's voice lashed him.

"You keep shet there, stranger! What do *you* know about miracles? Get aft there where ye belong!

I'm skipper of this here craft! The mate, there"—he wagged his head toward Richard—"he knows where we're bound." His eyes dropped again to the book in his hands and thence went swiftly, triumphantly, to the clergyman. "Wednesday, at sundown, parson! An' what time was it that little formality of ours took place in the tower room on Wednesday?"

"You know, Peter," the clergyman said nervously, "that there was no sunset, because of the rain, but it was the hour of sunset."

"Ye're right!" exulted Peter. "It was the hour of sunset!"

He looked about him defiantly, but of those four immobile figures only the girl found the startling significance of his announcement. She drew in a sharp breath, but this was the only sound in the charged silence of the room.

"Do ye begin to see the hand of God in this, parson? Do ye begin to see the miracle? Ye can find it in your own Book, but it reads a little different in mine."

"Find what, Peter? Find what, man?"

"The miracle, parson—like I said. Mebbe ye fergit that the sun rises in the east. Mebbe it ain't occurred to ye that it takes about five hours, or more, from the time it sets in France until it sets here. Mebbe ye didn't stop to think of that!"

The clergyman's plump hand went tremblingly to his beard. Richard, still standing beside his chair, was in the clutch of a befuddling stupor. Only his eyes were alive. They looked like two gleaming pools in his white face. The young lawyer's eyes bore the startled look of one staring in at some caged monstrosity and doubting the authenticity of what he saw.

But old Peter Stayton was fully restored—a mariner who takes the helm of his floundering ship from the hand of a clumsy subordinate, and feels her respond to his practiced touch. His little, deep-set, blue eyes were glittering behind his straggling brows. There was the old cocky swagger in the way he thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and rocked gently from heel to toe.

"Do ye see it now, parson? The sun sets in France five hours sooner than it sets here. When it's sun-down here, in summer, it's midnight there." He threw out his hands in an exuberant sweep. "There's your miracle, folks!"

The clergyman spoke awesomely.

"Then, Peter—then these young people are——"

"Are what they been hankerin' to be to each other, parson. When the sun was settin' here on Wednesday, Richard had been a widower nigh fer five hours!"

But it was to the girl that her father turned for his reward. His voice was not quite so steady, not quite so strong, when he spoke to her.

"I got my chance, Dorie—I got my chance to undo what I done to ye!"

She did not hear him, she did not see him, for Richard was moving slowly, dazedly, across to her. Neither of them was aware of anything save the miracle that the old sea captain had brought to light.

It was a bewildered and mute young lawyer who found himself, a moment later, being escorted down the gravel path by the hysterically loquacious Peter.

"Ye see, friend, how it is—Richard'll be wantin' to transact a little business inside there, an' it might

be best fer ye to wait fer him out here. Mebbe ye'd like to drive down to the shore—it's a purty view from the sluice. Ye can see the light, and nigh to New London on a clear day. Then ye can come back after a bit." He grew warmly confidential. "Ye see, Richard's aimin' to have a word er two with my daughter. Ye noticed her, I expect—Dorcas, her name is. She keeps house fer me—leastways, she did, an' she's a——" He faltered, and then went on sturdily: "She's a Tartar, that girl!"

The clergyman had come outside, and was waiting on the porch steps, when the old man came back from the gate. For a long moment each suffered the other's half-furtive appraisal.

"Where did you take the stranger, Peter?"

"I veered him off to look at the view, parson," Peter said dryly. "I notice most city folks is sort of set on views. I calc'lated Dick would be wantin' a word er two with Dorie."

He was on the defensive now and determined to head off any righteous harangue that the clergyman might have in store for him. But the little parson only drew the back of his hand across his eyes and studied the bright drops that gleamed there when he looked down at it.

"Thank God!" he whispered. "They'll have plenty of time for a word or two, Peter—and for all the good things they deserve!"

Peter had thrust his hands into his pockets, but rather to conceal their unsteadiness than to demonstrate his complete nonchalance.

"Where be they, do ye know?"

"I think," Mr. Beckwith said softly, "they're up in the tower room."

The felt silent; but the conscientious clergyman

was urged to speech by a sense of duty only partly fulfilled. He did his best to assume his sternest expression.

"I hope we've both learned our lesson, Peter."

"Lesson, parson?" drawled Peter.

"Those two have found their reward, but it's no thanks to us. It doesn't abrogate our sins, or make our guilt any the less." He sighed. Peter shifted his feet uneasily. "Theirs is the reward of the righteous, Peter. 'Verily there is a reward for the righteous.'"

A smile broke over the old sea captain's face, and he shot a quizzical glance at the clergyman's solemn countenance.

"Ye think I'm sharin' in that reward when I don't deserve it, eh, parson?"

"You don't, Peter. You know very well that you don't."

"Mebbe not, friend, mebbe not," Peter ruminated, and there was a sly triumph behind the words; "but there's somethin' else in your Book about rewards, if I remember right. It goes like this." He rocked gently from heel to toe, his eyes twinkling up at the clergyman, who was squatting on the porch step above him. "'The great God rewardeth the fool as He rewardeth the transgressor.'"

The tower room was very quiet. The two who sat so close together on the couch needed no words. They demanded no further explanation of the circumstances that had given them to each other. Enough, for the present, that they were there together, that where there had been darkness there was light, that the heavy gold band on the girl's hand might stay where Richard's reverent lips had blessed it.

They were still sitting there, with the ruddy glow of another sunset pouring in upon them, when Rose Ruby appeared in the open doorway. Sensing an occasion worthy of her green dress, she had hurried home to effect the change; but her splendor was half concealed beneath one of Dorcas' big aprons, and a faint aroma of broiling chops emanated from her as she stood grinning happily in at them.

"Yer father says, will ye please come down to supper? The city man's stoppin', too, an' we're goin' to have chops."

Dorcas nodded, and would have drawn away from Richard's encircling arms, but that they closed more snugly about her. Rose Ruby turned away with an appreciative smack of her lips; but a sudden bright thought brought her to a halt.

"I calc'late ye'll be goin' away purty soon on yer weddin' trip." The last words lit up her seamy old face with a rich glow. "I had one once—a weddin' trip. Why don't ye go where he took me—to Coney Island? It's a grand place!"

THE END.

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